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INSTAGRAM USERS' MEANING CONSTRUCTION THROUGH MICRO- INFLUENCER-GENERATED CONTENT

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ABSTRACT

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In 2019, Instagram is the fastest-growing social platform with over a billion monthly users sharing more than 95 million images and videos daily. Social media influencers have become a new, effective way of reaching the right target audience and building relationships between brands and consumers.

The purpose of this study is to understand how meanings are constructed by the followers of Instagram micro-influencers. Furthermore, this study exposes the factors that explain micro-influencer following.

The theoretical framework consists of the uses and gratifications theory, meaning construction, semiotics and influence theories. Based on these theories, the theoretical framework focuses on an individual's meaning construction, which is influenced by memories, values, culture, language, beliefs, motivations, social relations and media usage. The meanings in an image are a negotiation between the producer and the viewer, and reflect individual values, attitudes and political, social and cultural beliefs. Meanings are therefore produced between the micro-influencers' content and the interpretation of the follower.

The research questions were answered through insight provided by ten in-depth ZMET interviews that were conducted in Finland and in Canada. Four emerging thematic meaning constructs and factors, four core meanings and multiple subthemes were found that explain Instagram's micro-influencer following and relationship formation.

It was found that a sense of similarity, shared meanings and personality presented through visual content by the micro-influencer has a substantial impact on micro-influencer following. In addition, the results confirmed that people seek motivation, inspiration and confirmation of their own beliefs, situations and experiences in life from the micro-influencer and build a sense of belongingness and themselves. Based on the results of this research, a model of the different levels of relationship formation was created. The study gives insight into the various aspects of influencer marketing that need to be taken into consideration by practitioners and gives guidance on how to create compelling influencer marketing strategies and campaigns through meaningful content in order to form valuable relationships with consumers.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, meaning construction, semiotics, ZMET

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| 1 INTRODUCTION | 5 |
| 1.1 A new era of self-brands and influencers | 5 |
| 1.2 Problem setting and research questions | 7 |
| 2 MEANING CONSTRUCTION IN SOCIAL MEDIA | 11 |
| 2.1 The uses and gratifications theory: why do we use media? | 11 |
| 2.1.1 The uses and gratifications theory in social media | 12 |
| 2.2 Meaning construction | 14 |
| 2.2.1 Semiotics | 17 |
| 2.2.2 Visual social semiotics | 21 |
| 2.3 Social media influencers..... | 24 |
| 2.3.1 From brand endorsers to social media influencers | 26 |
| 2.3.2 Micro-influencers on Instagram | 29 |
| 2.3.3 Instagram | 30 |
| 2.4 Synthesis of the theoretical framework..... | 35 |
| 3 CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH | 38 |
| 3.1 Research philosophy | 38 |
| 3.2 Research strategy | 40 |
| 3.2.1 The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique..... | 41 |
| 3.2.2 Data generation..... | 46 |
| 3.2.3 Data analysis..... | 48 |
| 4 MEANINGS BEHIND INSTAGRAM'S MICRO-INFLUENCER FOLLOWING | 50 |
| 4.1 Consensus map of users' meanings behind Instagram micro-influencer following ... | 50 |
| 4.1.1 Valuing aesthetic, appealing and unique content..... | 54 |
| 4.1.2 The personality and lifestyle presented by the micro-influencer | 56 |
| 4.1.4 Admiration, inspiration and motivation | 59 |
| 4.1.3 Identifying with the micro-influencer | 62 |
| 4.2 The relationship between Instagram micro-influencers and their followers..... | 65 |
| 4.3 Seeking advice versus promoting on Instagram..... | 73 |
| 4.4 Re-evaluation of the theoretical framework | 76 |
| 5 SUMMARY | 79 |
| 5.1 Summary of the research | 79 |
| 5.2 Theoretical contribution of the research | 82 |
| 5.3 Practical implications of the research | 84 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| 5.4 Further research | 87 |
| 6 REFERENCES | 89 |
| 7 APPENDICES..... | 102 |
| APPENDIX 1: Invitation and instructions for the participants | 102 |
| APPENDIX 2: Modified ZMET interview used in this research | 103 |
| APPENDIX 3: Participant A's images | 104 |
| APPENDIX 4: Participant A's mental map | 105 |
| APPENDIX 5: Participant C's images | 106 |
| APPENDIX 6: Participant C's mental map | 107 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | |
|--|----|
| Figure 1. The coat of arms of Finland | 18 |
| Figure 2. Peirce's Triadic Model of signification | 19 |
| Figure 3. Granovetter's strength of weak ties theory | 25 |
| Figure 4. Instagram application | 32 |
| Figure 5. Instagram filters | 34 |
| Figure 6. Theoretical framework of the study | 37 |
| Figure 7: The consensus map of users' meanings behind Instagram micro-influencer following..... | 53 |
| Figure 8. Relationship formation between Instagram's micro-influencers and their followers | 68 |
| Figure 9. Re-evaluation of the theoretical framework | 78 |

LIST OF TABLES

| | |
|---|----|
| Table 1: Overview of the participants | 47 |
| Table 2: Overview of the micro-influencers chosen by the interviewees | 51 |

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 A new era of self-brands and influencers

Social media is the market's answer to a generation that demanded to perform. Here, we perform everything to each other, all the time, for no reason. (Bo Burnham 2016)

Through the rise of Web 2.0 and social media, companies have faced a new era that has shaken the traditional methods of marketing and communication. A more scattered media sphere, new arising platforms and fragmented markets challenge the ways of reaching and targeting consumers. However, both consumers and their communication needs have altered and affect the way they communicate and interact with each other, brands and companies. Furthermore, globalization has had an impact on both international and structural ideological pressures that encourage neoliberal labour market policies and has exposed workers to global competition (McBride & Williams 2001, 282). As a result, self-branding has become a vital part of today's labour markets regardless of age, position or the business for which an individual works.

In 1997 Tom Peters published an article called *The Brand Called You* in which he argued that individuals need to take control of their own brand identity and build their own brands just as big companies such as Nike, Coca-Cola and Prada do. Peters (1997) reasoned that use of the same branding logic by individuals is essential and inevitable in today's world. The biggest trick in building a self-brand is to find ways to nurture your network and benefit from word-of-mouth marketing. As Marwick (2015, 140) states, "a self-presentation strategy requires viewing oneself as a consumer product and selling this image to others."

Khamis et al. (2017) note that through the rise of social media, self-branding has flourished and claim that there are three main reasons for the growth of self-branding. First of all, social media and its various platforms make fame and wealth possible for "ordinary" users and thus encourage individuals to seek micro-celebrity. Secondly, Khamis et al. (2017) state that self-branding is encouraged with the promise of these rewards within a political culture of neoliberal individualism. Lastly, successful social media influencers have inspirationally used self-branding and practices of micro-celebrity which seem to be replicable (Khamis et

al. 2017, 194). Through self-branding and the rise of social media, the phenomenon of social media influencers has risen.

Social media influencers are a new form of “celebrity”, where individuals use self-branding strategies to cultivate as much attention as possible and create an authentic personal brand through the use of social networks (Hearn & Schoenhoff 2016; Khamis et al. 2017). Therefore, celebrity has become a continuum of practices that can be performed by anyone who has a mobile screen, a laptop or a tablet (Marwick 2015, 140), and celebrity status is relatively easy to achieve. In today’s markets, the presence of an attentive audience may be the most powerful status symbol of all (Marwick 2015, 141).

Viral marketing is based on existing social networks where people share information and recommend products and services within their network. The reason why viral marketing is so effective is that it is based on trusting other people such as friends, family and nowadays anyone within your network, such as strangers and influencers. Previous research has shown that people trust opinions and recommendations from their social network far more than traditional advertisements (Nail et al. 2004). Moreover, viral marketing is based on the assumption that a few influential members or nodes of a network influence others in that network and, therefore, they trigger a wave of recommendations and ultimately get people to try the recommended products and services (Kempe et al. 2003, 106).

By posting aspirational photos, using hashtags and engaging with followers, users of Instagram can achieve the highly desirable status of *Instafame*. Marwick (2015, 137) defines *Instafame* as a condition that Instagram users can achieve by having a relatively large number of followers on Instagram. Through the rise of influencers, companies have found a new way to reach consumers. Today, marketers capitalise on social media influencers’ wide social networks and benefit from the intimate, authentic and trustworthy relationship the influencers have created with their audience (Hearn & Schoenhoff 2016, 202-205). According to a study by Nielsen (2015), 92% of people trust recommendations from peers, family and friends - even strangers - more than any other type of advertising. Therefore, social media influencers have become the new, effective way of reaching the right target audience and building relationships between brands and consumers. In 2019, Instagram is the fastest-growing social platform with over a billion monthly users who share more than

95 million images and videos daily. As a result, 93% of influencer marketing campaigns use Instagram. (99firms 2019.)

1.2 Problem setting and research questions

Communication specialists agree that more than 80% of all human communication is nonverbal (Catchings-Castello 2000, 7) and argue that imagery “is not just a part of everyday life, it is everyday life” (Mirzoeff 1999, 1). Social media platforms that are based on visuality, such as Instagram, have increasingly gained popularity among users over the years (Statista 2018). According to van Dijck (2008, 57): “Digital cameras, camera phones, photo blogs and other multipurpose devices are used to promote the use of images as the preferred idiom of a new generation of users”. In addition, photographs are increasingly becoming a tool for an individual’s identity formation and communication.

Pearce et al. (2018, 6) note that “Several scholars have shown the importance of the visual to understanding social media, especially arguing for the image’s increasing imbrication in self-representation, storytelling, affect, and the creation of publics in digital media ecologies”. The visual is central in everyday life and social media practices, which is why researchers need to examine and address social media in more broad and diverse ways (Highfield & Leaver 2016, 51). However, marketing research has not focused sufficiently on visual content even though visuality is a rising phenomenon in marketing and in the culture in which we are living.

The purpose of this study is to understand how meanings are constructed by followers of Instagram micro-influencers and to detect factors that explain micro-influencer following. This study focuses on the social media platform Instagram since it has been proved to be the central channel in influencer marketing (Salpini 2017; Statista 2018; Williams 2018) due to Instagram’s visual appeal and because influencers are provided with better creative tools on Instagram than on other channels (Casaló et al. 2018).

It is important to study influencer marketing on social media since content posted by influencers truly affects the perceptions, thoughts and behaviour of the followers. Influencer marketing content on Instagram grew by 198% in 2017 (Maoz 2018) and it is a trend in

marketing that has been predicted to grow in the future (Forbes 2018). In 2017, the worldwide Instagram influencer market value was 1.07 billion U.S. dollars. In 2019, this value is projected to more than double to 2.38 billion U.S. dollars (Statista 2018). Influencer marketing has attracted a great deal of interest in previous research. These studies have mainly focused on the various ways that brands can find and manage relationships with social media influencers (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders 2017; Ferguson 2008), how users engage with textual content on social media, and on the context of Instagram usage or its technical dimensions (Highfield & Leaver 2015; Marcus 2015; Sheldon & Bryant 2016). According to Zappavigna (2016, 275) Instagram is an interesting channel and environment to study meaning making since it also has a set of visual limitations to the posts, making it a constrained environment.

Nevertheless, the biggest gap in previous studies lies in the fact that they neglect the viewer's meaning-making and importance in influencer marketing and focus either on the influencer-brand relationship or on the ways an individual can become an influencer, and what features are important when building an influencer brand. Previous research neglects the fact that influencers are selected by their followers and that an influencer's success truly lies in the followers, which is why the focus should be turned on the followers' meaning making. Moreover, nowadays consumers are drowning in various marketing messages from multiple channels, so it is important to understand what kind of messages and content are found to be appealing and meaningful and how they create meaning and emotions. This understanding would help marketers create content and marketing material that is perceived as valuable and which is able to grasp the attention of consumers and better serve the purposes of organizations.

Thus, it is important to recognize the meanings constructed through the visual choices in social media content (Zappavigna 2016, 272) and understand how the content is interpreted by the viewer.

Hence, this study seeks to address an important gap in the extant research by focusing on the meanings that are constructed through Instagram content and what these mean to micro-influencers' followers by answering the following questions:

1. How are meanings constructed through Instagram micro-influencers' content and how are they interpreted by the micro-influencers' followers?
2. What kind of factors explain micro-influencer following?

The aim of this thesis is to gain a deep understanding of how followers' meanings are constructed through micro-influencer-generated content. "Content" means everything the micro-influencers can create on Instagram including images, videos, Instagram Stories and texts in image captions. In this thesis, meanings are seen as the underlying motivation behind thoughts and actions (Krauss 2005, 762–763) which people actively modify, oppose and construct (Jensen 1991, 4). According to Krauss (2005, 762–763), meanings are the most fundamental part of a human social setting. Meanings are the linguistic categories that form a participant's view of reality and with which actions are defined. In accordance with earlier research from various fields such as psychology, sociology and mass communication, the present study is based on the assumption that personal history, memories, values, culture, language, beliefs and social relations affect an individual's meaning construction and formation. Furthermore, social networks, which today are both virtual and face-to-face, affect a person's meaning formation and value hierarchy.

First, an overview of existing theory, literature and research will be presented, including the uses and gratifications theory, meaning construction, semiotics and various influence theories. Based on these, a theoretical framework will be introduced and discussed at the end of section two. The present study aligns with the social constructionist view that understanding of phenomena can be gained through structure, individual experiences, meanings and discourses (Hackley 1998, 127). Methodologically, this study adopts the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) to gather and analyse data collected in ten separate interviews. The aim is to reveal a structure of meanings that are formed within the social processes of the individuals and to understand behaviour, meanings and the world from the participants' frame of reference. Social constructionism focuses on individuals' interpretations of their experiences and, thus, enables the researcher to move closer to a meaningful engagement with the phenomena and the social world of the participants (Hackley 1998, 130).

Subsequently, the results of the study will be presented and explored in section four. Since this thesis concentrates on understanding consumers and their meaning-construction when

dealing with micro-influencer-produced content, the company perspective, including branding and company-generated content such as ads, is not addressed. However, aspects of how consumers perceive brand-related content on Instagram through micro-influencers will be discussed in broader terms in section five. Due to the limitations of this research, other social media platforms, traditional media and their impact on consumers' meaning-construction are left out of this research. The thesis will conclude by presenting theoretical and practical implications and suggestions for future research in influencer marketing.

2 MEANING CONSTRUCTION IN SOCIAL MEDIA

2.1 The uses and gratifications theory: why do we use media?

As long as media have existed, through traditional media and later the new media, researchers have been interested in understanding the reasons why people use media and what gratifications it provides. At first, researchers were interested in why people read newspapers and, later on, why they listen to the radio. Berelson (1949) found that people use newspapers as a tool for daily living, for social aspects such as social content, information and interpretation and respite. In consensus, Mendelsohn identified in 1964 that companionship, a desire to change one's mood, countering loneliness or boredom, providing useful information and news, having social interaction and participating in events were generalized functions of radio listening (Mendelsohn 1964). Thereafter, researchers were broadly interested in television viewing patterns and motivations. A study conducted by Rubin in 1983 revealed that people watch television to pass the time, for entertainment, to escape from problems, people or tasks, to seek information and to learn. Furthermore, Rubin came to the conclusion that television use seems to gratify time consumption, entertainment and interrelated habitual needs and that television content seeks to satisfy information needs (Rubin 1983, 50).

The uses and gratifications theory, a social-psychological approach to communication needs, has provided a fruitful lens to understand the use of media throughout time. During its long history, the uses and gratifications theory has sought to understand communication needs (Rubin & Rubin 1992, 306). According to the uses and gratifications theory, people are active in choosing and using media based on their individual differences and needs (Rubin & Rubin 1992; Ruggiero 2000). Tan (1985) agreed that individuals select the medium that meets their needs, which can be needs such as emotional connection, status or a desire for information. Rubin & Rubin (1982) noted that life satisfaction, interpersonal interaction, social activity, economic security, physical health and mobility explain interpersonal needs and motives. In the uses and gratifications theory, media use and effects are influenced by physiological circumstances, motives, needs, the social environment and expectations about mediated communication (Haridakis & Hanson 2009, 318). In addition, Rubin et al. (2003) explained that media behaviour is motivated, goal-directed and purposive. In Rubin

et al.'s (2003) assumption, the central concept is motivation. Research has shown that communication behaviour, such as the use, interpretation and selection of media, is influenced by motivation (Haridakis & Hanson 2009, 318).

In addition, it has been noted that people's needs and motives are influenced by both social (background, psychological characteristics, life situation) and societal (cultural, economic, social, political and media systems) structures, and the use of media is influenced by individual differences such as gender, personality and age (Rosengren 1974). The choices of communication channels and content are influenced by motives and the needs on which motives are built (Rubin & Rubin 1992, 206). Moreover, communication behaviour produces affective, behavioural and cognitive gratifications which affect social-psychological and societal structures. According to Rubin and Rubin (1992), people communicate to seek pleasure, affection, relaxation and to be included.

In 1980, Cutler and Danowski argued that media gratifications are divided into two main categories: content gratification and process gratification. They stated that people derive value from the information in media messages or gain gratification from being involved in the process, i.e., by using and experiencing the media (Cutler & Danowski 1980).

Moreover, Perse and Courtright (1993) concluded that people are aware of communication alternatives and select channels that are based on normative images that the channel is perceived to have. It has also been noted by earlier research that individuals seek media content that has a functional relation to situations in which they are involved (Perse & Courtright 1993, 486–487; Ruggiero 2000, 18).

2.1.1 The uses and gratifications theory in social media

Chamberlain (1994) argued that through new media, e.g., the internet, and the demassification of media, individuals can tailor their media usage and messages to their needs. Williams et al. (1988) defined demassification as the control of the individual over the medium and noted that a unique characteristic of new media is its interactivity. Media's interactivity leads to greater involvement. Involvement, on the other hand, is seen as the degree to which an individual actively participates with the medium and the information-

exchange process (Williams et al. 1998, 169). Krugman (1971, 3) defines involvement as the number of personal connections between the viewer and the content of the stimuli. According to Williams et al. (1988), involvement can be either social or psychological and these two levels may interact. Psychological involvement happens through perceptual and cognitive processes which are either involuntary or voluntary, whereas social involvement is interaction between individuals through a communication medium.

Through the rise of new mediums, research has successfully used the uses and gratifications theory to examine the use of the web, blogs, online gaming and social-networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Myspace (Chen 2011, 756; Lucas & Sherry 2004). Whiting and Williams (2013) found that there were common themes among studies that had used the uses and gratifications theory to study social media usage and its frameworks. The seven themes were social interaction, information seeking, pastimes, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility and convenience utility. In their study, Whiting and Williams included expressing opinions, surveillance and watching others as other reasons for using social media. They noted that received gratification is a good predictor of media use and recurring media use (Whiting & Williams 2013, 363).

Today, research acknowledges social media as a primary communication channel for both consumers and companies. There has been broad interest in continuing to investigate consumers' motives for different social network usage (Chen 2010; Java et al. 2007; Joinson 2008; Park et al. 2009; Schneider et al. 2009; Sheldon & Bryant 2016). Furthermore, marketers have sought to understand what specific motives and needs consumers have regarding their use of media, whereas brand managers have been interested in how they can satisfy consumers' needs and reinforce a consumer-brand relationship.

Most studies agree that people use social media for daily activities and to seek or share information (Ellison et al. 2007; Java et al. 2007, Lee & Ma 2012). Furthermore, people use social networks for social activities and to connect with others (Chen 2010; Cheung et al. 2011; Joinson 2008; Ryan & Xenos 2011). In addition, the results indicate that people use different social networks for different reasons. For example, Marcus (2015) concluded in his study that Instagram exists for people to self-promote and, furthermore, that Instagram is based more on one's personal identity rather than relational identity. Another study by Sheldon and Bryant (2016) revealed that Instagram usage is based on four main reasons:

surveillance/knowledge about others, documentation, coolness, and creativity. In contrast, Facebook and Twitter are used mostly for connecting with others, gaining social capital, gaining information and for entertainment (Chen 2010; Chu & Kim 2011; Ellison et al. 2007; Joinson 2008; Park et al. 2009; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke 2008; Ryan & Xenos 2011).

A study by Lee et al. (2015) revealed that because of Instagram's visually oriented culture and the mobile-only accessibility, motives and user behaviour are different on Instagram than on other social networking sites. Furthermore, their study suggested that Instagram users have five primary psychological and social motives: self-expression, social interaction, escapism, archiving and peeking. Lee et al. (2015) noticed in their study of motives for using Instagram that social interaction and maintaining and establishing relationships with others are strong motives for using the platform. They also noted that people actively seek other users who have similar needs and interests and thus feel a strong connection to them. People on Instagram use the app's visuality to express themselves, to display their lifestyle, tastes and personalities.

2.2 Meaning construction

Meaning, in the field of marketing, has been and remains one of the most complex artefacts to theorize and study. Marketers seek to facilitate meanings that produce positive outcomes for products, brand images, narratives and purchase intentions. On the other hand, consumers acquire, share, use and experience these meanings through consumption. (Mick et al. 2004, 1.)

Along with marketing researchers, scientists from various fields, including physiology, sociology and mass communication, have tried to understand the construction of human thoughts, action, meaning and communication for decades. In mass communication studies, meaning is a discursive and social phenomenon (Jensen 1991, 3). Nowadays, mass communication studies view audiences as active, constitutive and interpretive participants instead of passive viewers. Therefore, people actively participate in modifying, opposing and constructing meanings offered by media (Jensen 1991, 4). According to Krauss (2005, 762–763), meanings are the most fundamental part of a human social setting. Meanings are the linguistic categories that form a participant's view of reality and through which actions are

defined. According to Lofland & Lofland (1996), meanings are also understood as “culture, norms, understandings, social reality, and definitions of the situation, typifications, ideology, beliefs, worldview, perspective or stereotypes”. Meanings do more than describe behaviour; they define, justify, and interpret behaviour as well. As such, meaning is the basis of interpretation and application of knowledge and is the underlying motivation behind thoughts and actions. (Krauss 2005, 762–763.)

The primary goal of physical sciences is to understand how people give meaning to their experiences and their relations to the world around them (Molden & Dweck 2006, 192). People need figurative expressions such as metaphors and narratives to understand the richness of experience in language. Figurative expressions help to expand the meanings contained in literal language and more closely indicate experienced meanings (Polkinghorne 2000, 139).

How people interact and structure the world with meanings based on events in their social and physical environment has been a long-lasting interest of psychological and sociological research. Kelly proposed in 1955 with his personal construct theory that people have a set of subjective conceptual representations which they use to evaluate the environment for useful and meaningful information. According to Kelly (1955), people explain and understand the world as they perceive it, and this understanding is constructed through an individual's experiences. On the other hand, Osgood's and Tannenbaum's congruity theory (1955) concentrated on semantic differences and they claimed that people's attitudes and preferences are built on basic evaluative meanings. Furthermore, it has been noted in earlier research that people strive for relationships that are harmonious with their beliefs, behaviours and feelings (Borgatti & Halgin 2011; Byrne 1971).

Social cognitive theory believes that a central role in human action and meaning construction is played by cognitive, indirect, self-reflective and self-regulatory processes. It has been noted that external influences affect behaviour through cognitive processes (Bandura 1989). Moreover, these cognitive factors furthermore determine how people observe and give meaning to environmental events, and what motivational or emotional impact these events have on an individual. Symbolization is a big part of these cognitive processes: symbols provide humans a tool to comprehend and process their environment and transform these experiences into cognitive models which serve as guides for action and judgement. Through

the medium of symbols, people generate solutions to problems, communicate with each other and give meaning to experiences (Bandura 2009, 193). Already in 1959, Levy noted that transactions between marketers and consumers are, above all else, exchanges of meanings. Perceived meanings are the core in many fields of marketing, such as customer relationship management and the study of exchanges (Thompson 1997, 438). This is why marketers have had, and should have, an interest in understanding meanings.

In cognitive psychology, meaning is seen as the goal of communication and also as the control of memory and perceptions. Human cultures are distinguished by the meanings that different people give to artefacts, human relations and natural phenomena. Therefore, meanings are the base of all social activities and culture (Glenberg & Robertson 2000, 379). According to a study by Glenberg and Robertson (2000), meaning emerges from the mesh of goals, learning history and affordances. Thus, the meaning of a word is not given by its relations to abstract symbols or to other words. Glenberg and Robertson explain this through an example: the meaning of the word “chair” is not fixed: “A chair can be used to sit on, or as a step stool, or as a weapon. Depending on our learning histories, it might also be useful in a balancing act or to protect us from lions in a circus ring” (Glenberg & Robertson 2000, 388).

Most studies agree that people use words, language, metaphors and narratives as a way to encode meanings. Apart from observable linguistic knowledge, meaning construction is an active process where people use many non-linguistic clues, such as background, contextual knowledge and knowledge of conceptual metaphors (Fauconnier 1994). The conceptual blending theory (Fauconnier & Turner 1998) emphasizes the role of metaphors as analogical mappings in cognition and language usage. To construct meaning, people use a basic mental operation, which Fauconnier and Turner call conceptual blending. Conceptual blending is a partial match between two inputs, which dynamically develop into blended cognitive mental models in a network of mental spaces.

In order to understand meaning, a construction of blended cognitive models and emergent structure is needed. Emergent structure emerges from the processes of blending when two inputs meet (Coulson & Oakley 2005; Fauconnier & Turner 1998). It has been proposed that complex conceptual blending (also called “double-scope integration”) plays an underlying role in meaning-construction and is needed for thought and language to occur. Therefore,

mental spaces contain perceived, remembered, imagined and understood representations of the speaker. The same scenario can be construed in multiple ways and, thus, people use mental spaces to segregate the elements of incoming information contained in a speaker's representation (Coulson & Oakley 2005, 1512).

The hermeneutic problem when studying meanings is that the consumer's expressed meanings are formed in a complex field of historical and social relationships. Fauconnier and Turner (2003, 61) described meaning construction as being similar to the evolution of species: "It has coherent principles that operate all the time in an extremely rich mental and cultural world". The person's personal history determines how perceptions are framed, and personal histories may cause very different meaning systems across individuals (Thompson 1997, 439). In accordance with this, Erikson (1963) suggested that meanings have two sub-categories: unique meanings and common meanings. A common meaning may be the same for a group of people, but there may also be unique meanings for an individual within that group. Therefore, unique meanings are a part of the meaning-construction process and the different factors that influence it (Krauss 2005, 763). Thus, consumption needs, and self-perceptions may vary according to situations, depending on which personal meanings are significant in a given consumption context.

2.2.1 Semiotics

When understanding how meanings are constructed and interpreted in social media content, semiotics cannot be neglected. Semiotics analyses the non-verbal and verbal structures of meaning-producing events (Mick 1986, 197). According to Mick (1986), semiotics can be divided into general semiotics and specific semiotics. The first tries to understand the nature of meaning, and the latter tries to grasp how we acquire meaning through our reality, which is constructed through theories, myths, products/services, words and gestures (Mick 1986, 197).

Semiotics explores sign systems or codes that are essential in all kinds of communication. In semiotics, signs are seen as words, objects, gestures, images and sounds and are regarded as anything that can stand for or communicate about something else (Chandler 2007, 2; Eco 1976, 7). A sign is formed of an *expression*, which can be a word, a sound or

a symbol that represents something to a person. *Content* completes the meaning of the expression. These meanings are social and vary from person to person. A person wearing Louis Vuitton, Michael Kors or Prada usually links to wealth, riches and a high status. Roses are associated with love and caring. Therefore, signs always need an *interpretant* to give meaning to them (Cullum-Swan & Manning 1994). The meaning of a specific sign may also change according to the interpretant, be widely shared or specific to individuals, households and subcultures (Mick 1997, 245–246). A lion with a crown may not form meanings such as homeland, pride and strength to foreigners as it does to Finnish people (Figure 1.)

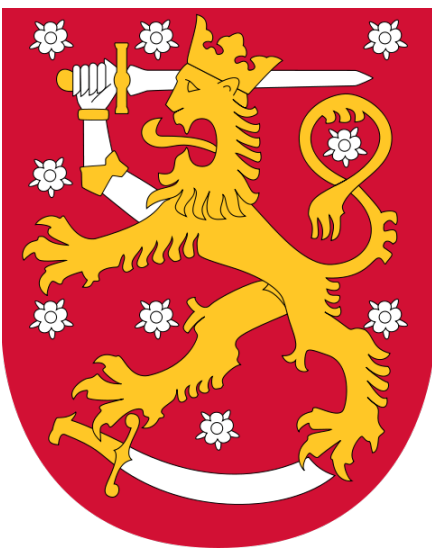


Figure 1. The coat of arms of Finland (www.finland100.fi)

Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) alongside philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) are regarded as the founders of semiotics during the turn of the 20th century. Saussure saw language as a system of signs, and semiotics as a way to study the way signs operate (Mick 1986, 197). Peirce (1955, 98) used the term *semiotics* to describe the relation between signs and logic or thought.

Saussurean semiotics focuses on the underlying structures and rules of a semiotics system as a whole (Chandler 2007, 9). Saussure believed that the basis for meaning and reference is established between a signifier (a spoken word) and the signified (interpretant, referent; the thought or concept to which the word refers) (Mick 1997, 245; Nieder 2009, 100).

Moreover, Peirce believed that there are relationships and structures much more complex than just those that exist between the signifier and signified. He noted that the underlying meaning processes can be iconic, indexical or symbolic depending on the relationship between a sign and an object (Keane 2003, 413; Queiroz & Ribeiro 2002, 69). Iconic relations are based on likeness or similarity (a photograph is an icon of what it represents), indexical relations are based on a causal or other existential connection (dark clouds indicate rain), whereas symbols are based on cultural or convention rules that connect signs and objects (a red octagon means stop) (Mick 1997, 248; Mick et al. 2004, 8; Queiroz & Ribeiro 2002, 69).

Peirce developed the well-known model of signification (Figure 2). He stated that all thinking is signification, meaning that all thinking is a product of the interpretation of signs. He argued that the intellectual value of a thought is based on someone else's interpretation of it (Skagestad 2004, 247). Therefore, the semiotic interpretation of an individual includes perceptions, social structure and culture. Peirce's model includes a sign (the representamen), the object (what the representamen refers to, either mental or physical) and the interpretant (the response, interpretation or reaction). He noted that from a linguistic point of view, words are signs with two aspects: the phonic component (the signifier), and the ideational component (the signified) (Atkin 2010).

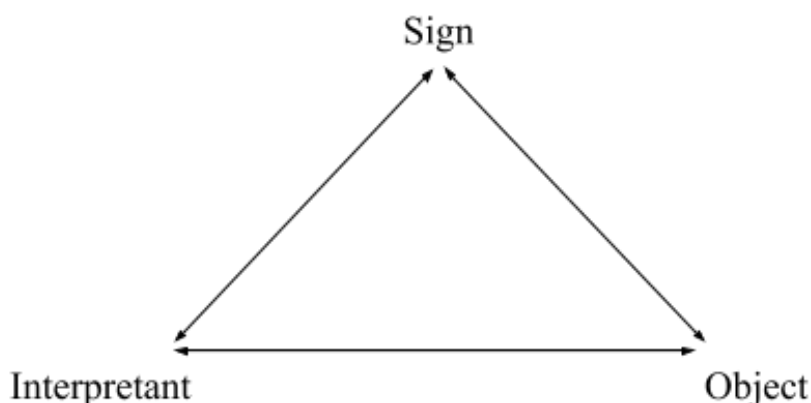


Figure 2. Peirce's Triadic Model of signification (Modified from Seppänen 2001, 176)

Martin and Veel (2005) argue that meaning making is organized around three generalized semiotic functions that are similar to Peirce's signification model: a presentation of something, the orientation of this presentation and the orientation of the presentation to others. This creates an organized structure of elements that are related. In other words,

when people construct presentations with resources such as language, these functions create presentational, orientational, interpersonal and textual linguistic metafunctions (Martin & Veel 2005, 91).

Semiotics addresses the different kinds of processes (induction, deduction, abduction) and reactions (types of interpretants) that consumers face when they are faced with marketing signs (Mick 1997, 247). According to Mick (1997, 254), semiotics has the richest source of tools, principles and concepts to study meanings and communication. Culler (1975, 466) stated that semiotics depends on a “primitive phenomenology”, meaning that signs, the meanings that are created from connections between expressions and contents, are socially constructed and maintained. These connections are the source of rules, ideas, politics, codes and practices from which cultures are built.

It has been argued that the core purpose of marketing is an exchange process of signs and meanings (Levy 1999; Mick 1997; Zakia & Nadin 1987). Baudrillard (1968, 276–277) agreed that consumption in itself is “an activity of systematic sign manipulation”, meaning that products become signs within the process of consumption. However, consumer behaviour literature has made a clear distinction between the objective qualities and the perceived and symbolic qualities of products. According to Nöth (1988), semiotic aspects of products have been studied mostly in the fields of advertising, brand image research and the theory of symbolic consumption. He stresses that the semiotics of commodities cannot be clearly divided into “utilitarian vs. semiotic” and proposes that “commodities are objects which are perceived by the consumer from various semiotic perspectives” (Nöth 1988, 5). Thøger Christensen and Askegaard (2001, 301) go as far as stating that “functionality itself is one of the most important symbols within modern Western culture.”

Nöth’s (1988) idea of how commodities can act as sources of meanings is threefold: the producer’s discourse about the product (proposing certain meanings) and how the consumer interprets this discourse, the consumer’s personal preferences or experiences of the products, and the consumer’s knowledge of the whole market offer and competing products (Nöth 1988, 5). Nöth’s ideas therefore indicate that there are contradictory and diverse perspectives when signs, symbols and meanings are discussed. The producer’s intentions for communicating meanings may never be interpreted as intended. Since marketing is based on sign processes (through communication, advertising, product packaging, brand

images and narratives), the need to better understand how signs are interpreted and used becomes essential (Zakia & Nadin 1987, 6).

2.2.2 Visual social semiotics

Those individuals who, in some almost magical way (which they may not completely understand themselves), have the ability to harness the power of the image must take responsibility for what they do. To the extent that seeing is believing, we must make sure that the images we create do not generate beliefs that are individually or socially destructive. (Arthur Asa Berger 1991)

Visual social semiotics in itself is not a theoretical framework but it stresses that an image is a social process. The meanings of an image are therefore a negotiation between the producer and the viewer, reflecting individual values, attitudes and political, social and cultural beliefs. (Harrison 2003, 47.) According to Midalia (1999, 131), visual images, like all representations, “are never innocent or neutral reflections of reality [...] they represent for us: that is, they offer not a mirror of the world but an interpretation of it”. Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2011, 6) agree that a representation is a process of the makers, who are affected by their cultural, social and physiological backgrounds, interests and the context in which the representation is produced. Today’s society is full of culturally produced semiotic resources, and Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2011, 11) claim that sign-makers “are guided by interest, that complex condensation of cultural and social histories and awareness of present contingencies”.

The relation between image and text has been discussed widely. Semiologist Roland Barthes raised the question of what is known as the problem facing the semiology of images: “Can analogical representation (the “copy”) produce true systems of signs and not merely simple agglutinations of symbols?” (Barthes 1993, 269). Barthes meant that an image can limit meaning. Therefore, the meanings in an image are too indefinite, opposed to various interpretations of meanings and, according to Barthes, should therefore be related and dependent on verbal text. Language gives order and similarity to the world of images. (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2011, 16–25.) Neri (1999) states that the meaning-construction of images is more complex and it is not only how the images are produced that affects the

meanings within it: “Each of us reacts to the picture on the basis of our own sensitivity, culture, intelligence, mood and passion. What is more, the interpretation of one and the same photograph will be different at different times. A photograph produced today will offer a different impact tomorrow. Even the place where the photograph is seen can dictate our reactions.”

Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2011, 2) note that visual structures, like linguistic structures, are based on different forms of interaction and interpretation that are formed from experiences. The well-known English adage “A picture is worth a thousand words” describes well the relationship between text and imagery: sometimes an image may convey meaning more effectively than text. On the other hand, sometimes meanings can only be expressed verbally. Nevertheless, Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2011, 2) state that whether or not things can be said only visually or verbally, *how* they are said differs between the verbal and the visual: “What is expressed in language through the choice between different word classes and semantic structures, is in visual communication, expressed through the choice between, for instance, different uses of colour, or different compositional structures.” Furthermore, Van Leeuwen and Jewitt claim that the dominant visual language nowadays is highly structured by the global cultural and technological mass media, which have a “normalizing” influence. Therefore, a photograph can produce and reinforce some culturally defined visual orders and norms (Seppänen 2001, 97). Seppänen (2011, 163) states that photographs play a crucial role in meaning-making: “Like metaphors, photographs open up new ways for alternative interpretations or for different kinds of experiences and feelings”. A text can be used as means of guiding interpretations but, on the other hand, photographs can also give new meanings to texts.

In visual culture research, the common central concern has been establishing meaning. The intertextual dimensions of images and social practices of which images are a part become meaningful in circulation and viewing (Hand 2017, 222; Sturken & Cartwright 2010; Van House 2011). Meanings within images are related to broader meaning systems that operate in cultures and societies. John Fiske noted that connotation means the interaction that forms when the interpreter’s feelings, cultural values and thoughts encounter the sign (Seppänen 2001, 95). These meaning systems usually conform to, but may also break, certain ideologies such as class, gender, culture, ethnicity or beauty. Therefore, advertisements, images and other visual material are a means to construct and form these social meanings

and norms. (Hand 2017, 226; Seppänen 2001.) Intertextual visuality in social media allows researchers to examine more broadly issues of method such as ethics, authenticity, access, scope and scale to indexicality (Hand 2017, 222).

Photography has been a democratic medium as long as it has existed and has acted as a means of verification or proof. Beginning in the 1980s computer imaging destroyed the way photographs were seen as tokens of truth, reality or authenticity. Every pixel in an image could be altered in terms of colour, brightness and focus. (Seppänen 2001.) Many ethical issues have emerged from imagery and the ability to alter photographs, and nowadays it is hard to distinguish an unedited image from one that has been manipulated.

Even when people realise that images can be altered, these edited and unedited images around us influence how we perceive and respond to the world. It often seems as if photographs are only visual records of events, particular moments or documents of what has happened, or how people look. It is too often forgotten that all visual content, pictures, videos, films and graphics are subjectively and culturally produced, that they contain meanings and signs, strengthening the views, norms and beliefs of our culture, and leaving out interfering representations. (Carrigan et al. 2005; Hand 2017; Seppänen 2001.)

Images affect our cognition, preference and interpretation in many conscious and unconscious ways and shape what we know and believe. Therefore, it has been argued by marketing scholars that images in marketing communication play pedagogical and persuasive roles that have wide-ranging influence and should, therefore, be considered as cultural texts (Carrigan et al. 2005, 581-582).

Though previous research has focused on identifying different motives for social media usage and drivers for social media engagement, only a few studies have focused on the posts' visual content (Jaakonmäki et al. 2017, 1152) and what is essential in it. Nieminen (2010, 71) states that after personal contact, the most powerful form of communication is an image. Images communicate business ideas and messages, and, in addition, create mental images for target groups. The most significant difference between a verbal and a visual message is the impact it has on consumers' emotions. Joffe (2008, 84–85) notes that visual messages send people on emotional pathways, whereas verbal material leaves people in a much more rational, logical and linear world of thought. Visual material is highly memorable

and, thus, visual material is a particularly powerful, perhaps even the most powerful, marketing communication tool. Therefore, understanding the visual choices and meanings behind social media images and how these choices and meanings affect consumers needs to be explored further.

Turner and Lefevre (2017) noted that social media allows for and encourages selective exposure, meaning that users are continuously exposed only to the content of the accounts that they have chosen to follow. This may lead to a narrowed exposure and may lead to users thinking that the behaviour presented in these popular accounts is more normal or common than it actually is. Thus, individuals may try to conform to the kind of behaviour that these accounts present. Accounts that have a large following may be perceived as authorities and influence a large audience through images that depict a certain kind of lifestyle, behaviour or diet. (Turner & Lefevre 2017, 282.) Marwick (2015, 157) concurs that Instagram is designed for personal visual display where micro-celebrities encourage the replication of the existing hierarchy of fame and physical and aesthetic imagery: "Rather than overturn the traditional hierarchies of fame, the Instafamous reinforce them by appealing to audiences using the familiar trappings of thin but buxom bodies, sports cars, and designer clothes. *Instafame* is not egalitarian but rather reinforces an existing hierarchy of fame, in which the iconography of glamour, luxury, wealth, good looks, and connections is inscribed in a visual digital medium" (Marwick 2015, 141).

2.3 Social media influencers

The traditional point of view of how innovations and trends spread within a network and get adopted is that there are a few individuals who have qualities that make them more influential than others. These individuals are respected, well-connected and informed, and are perceived as opinion leaders, innovators or mavens. However, it has been argued that the present culture has a bigger impact on information flow than influential people. It is in our present culture of the information age that people make choices based on the opinions of friends and peers. (Cha et al. 2010, 11.)

An important determinant of an individual's behaviour is the influence, information and opinions of other people. Influencing, information flow, acquisition and sharing have radically

changed through the rise of the internet and social media. Social media, as the name suggests, is all about social relationships between individuals. A new interesting feature of social media and the internet from a network perspective is their ability to link a large crowd of strangers together, where the information flow can be endless. Furthermore, Subramani & Rajagopalan (2003, 300) note that online social networks are a powerful source of information influencing, adoption and use of new products and services. Cha et al. (2010, 11) agree that online communities are a significant way of receiving information and influence and, thus, need to be further explored.

Granovetter's (1972) *strength of weak ties* theory suggests that the stronger the tie is between two people, the more likely their social worlds are to overlap. First of all, to understand ties Granovetter (1973, 1362) defines what the strength of a tie means: "(probably a linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding) and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie". This means that if A and B, and A and C, get along well, both B and C will form strong ties with A. Usually the third person, C, will also form a tie with both A and B. Granovetter explains this by stating that since A and B, and A and C are connected by a strong tie, and both B and C are similar to A, then it is presumable that B and C are similar to one another and, thus, will also form a tie after meeting, either a strong or a weak one (Figure 3). According to Granovetter (1973), this is because of transitivity, meaning that people tend to be homophilous and have stronger ties with people to whom they can relate and who are similar to themselves (Borgatti & Halgin 2011, 1170).

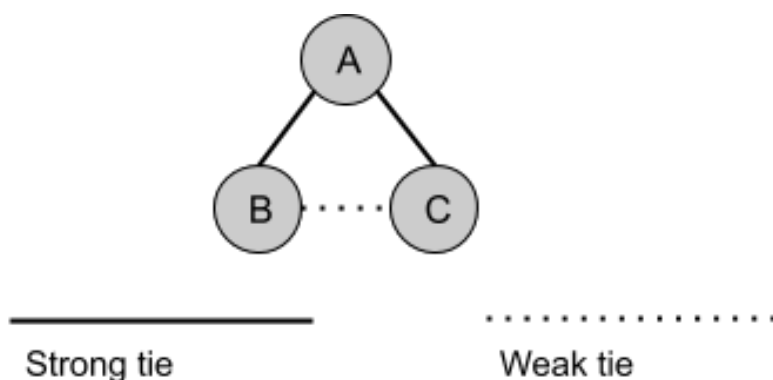


Figure 3. Granovetter's strength of weak ties theory (Modified from Granovetter 1972, 1365)

Furthermore, Granovetter notes that the theory also applies when reversed: If A and B, and A and C have weak ties, then B and C will also most likely be incompatible and, thus, will form a weak tie. This finding may also explain why people are more influenced by people with whom they have strong ties and vice versa. What interests many scientists and marketers is to understand which of the nodes in a network are the most influential and connected.

2.3.1 From brand endorsers to social media influencers

Marketers, companies and brands have used celebrities to endorse and promote their products for decades. Ohanian (1990, 42) claims that “advertisers' primary goal is to persuade their audience and to induce an attitude change toward their offering”; thus, using an endorser may help to achieve this goal. Brand endorsers can be experts, company presidents, athletes, celebrities, politicians or consumers (Friedman and Friedman 1979). Assael (1984) demonstrated that since consumers might symbolically want to be identified and associated with celebrities, they purchase products promoted by celebrities. This is why celebrities are effective promoters: they have a symbolic aspirational reference group association (Assael 1984; Kamins 1990, 4).

According to Casaló et al. (2018), previous research on opinion leadership has mainly concentrated on two aspects. First of all, previous studies have identified the characteristics and motivations of opinion leaders and have focused on social processes and trust-related aspects. Secondly, the focus of previous research has been on the role of personal traits in outlining opinion leaders' influence in areas such as decision making and on the diffusion of new products and innovations.

Romero et al. (2011,18) suggested in their study of influencing in social media that there are two aspects that are important in defining which information or content receives large attention. Firstly, the status and the popularity of an individual in a social network have an impact on the content's popularity. This can be measured by the level of attention they receive through followers who receive the individual's content. Secondly, the influence that an individual possesses has an effect on the content's popularity. This influence is achieved by spreading content through the network. According to Romero et al. (2011,18), influence

is formed when the followers can associate with the individual's content and when the individual frequently creates content which is perceived as valuable. Cha et al. (2010, 10) suggested that directed links indicate an individual's influence on others because they determine the flow of information. Interestingly enough, however, Romero et al. note (2011) that an important element that determines whether one becomes influential in a network is the inactive members of that network, because they provide a shield for propagation for the influential. Moreover, Subramani & Rajagopalan (2003, 306) contend that the success of viral marketing depends on the social network's perceiving the influencers as knowledgeable helpers rather than marketers' representatives. Therefore, influencers should not over-promote the products and services in order to be perceived as authentic helpers of others.

It is self-evident that users who have active followers are more influential. Therefore, looking solely at the number of followers is not the best indication of influence. Romero et al. (2011, 23) argued in their study that the correlation between popularity and influence may be weaker than expected. If users passively just read the content of popular accounts but do not act on it, the information does not spread within the network. Cha et al. (2010, 11) introduced three different types of influence a person can have in their study of Twitter. First of all, a person may have *indegree influence*, which is the number of followers or, in other words, the size of a user's audience. Secondly, a person may gain *retweet influence* which indicates the ability to generate content which spreads across the user's audience. Thirdly, *mention influence* measures the number of mentions containing a user's name and indicates whether a user can engage others in a conversation.

According to Jaakonmäki et al. (2017, 1152) the factors that lead to social media engagement can be divided into three groups: the creator, the context and the features of the content. Creator-related features are things such as the creator's age, gender, origin and the number of followers. Suh et al. (2010) found that on Twitter the number of times a tweet is retweeted is affected by the tweeter's number of both followers and followees. Furthermore, they found that URLs or hashtags in a tweet affect retweetability in a positive way. Age and experience also affect engagement. Time and location are contextual features of a social media post, and many studies have tried to identify the best time to post content on social media in order to gain the best amount of engagement, but the results are divided.

Social media's content features consist of text, audio and visuals. Bakhshi et al. (2014) studied what visual features of social media posts drive engagement. Their research focused on how the presence of a face, its age and gender impact social engagement on a particular image. Their results indicated that images with a human face are 38% more likely to receive likes and 32% more likely to receive comments than images that do not. Furthermore, they found that a person's age, gender and the number of faces in an image do not influence engagement. In another study by Bakhshi et al. (2015), over 7.6 million Flickr photos were analysed to study how filters affect a photo's engagement. They found that filtered photos are 21% more likely to be viewed and 45% more likely to be commented on than those without alterations.

Both Kamins (1990) and Ohanian (1991) found, in their separate studies, that the attractiveness of the endorser has an effect on attitude change concerning the endorsed products, issues and ad-based evaluations. Likewise, Kahle's and Homer's (1985, 957–960) study results suggested that brand recall is enhanced by the endorser's attractiveness. Additionally, Atkin and Block (1983) argued that a famous promoter can be influential for two reasons: their fame attracts attention to the brand, and celebrities are perceived as particularly dynamic, having attractive and likeable qualities. However, Ohanian (1991, 48) found that out of three characteristics of the endorser - trustworthiness, expertise and physical attractiveness - expertise had the biggest effect on the customers' intent to purchase the promoted product.

Kamins (1990) tested the "match-up hypothesis" and found that the characteristics of the endorser interact with the nature of the product advertised. Many studies have confirmed that endorsers are more effective when there is a "fit" between the endorser and the product. The same seems to apply in the social media context. Results by Casaló et al. (2018) confirmed that the perceived fit of the account with the consumer's personality strengthens the influence of opinion leadership on the intention to follow the advice posted by the influencer. Similarly, Till and Busler (2000, 3) noted that the ease of creating a link between two concepts depends on similarity, relatedness, fit or belongingness. Ohanian (1990, 42) adds attractiveness and likability to the list. Moreover, Till and Busler (2000) agree with earlier research about the match-up theory that the more similar two concepts are, the more likely it is that they will be connected within an associative network. The perceived

connection between an endorser and a brand, which is the associative link, drives endorser effects.

2.3.2 Micro-influencers on Instagram

In the broadcast era, celebrity was something a person was; in the Internet era, microcelebrity is something people do. (Marwick 2015, 140)

Lair et al. (2005, 318) note that personal branding relies on the perception or idea of a resourceful, creative, aggressive and independent professional who is self-motivated and self-promoting and who is ready for any opportunities that appear in the job market. Marwick (2015, 157) agrees that a person whose persona is aspirational, has the looks, the money and the access to celebrity has succeeded in what Marwick calls *Instafame*. Instafamous people are micro-celebrities who have used social media to create continuous streams of content and compete for the largest follower amounts (Marwick 2015, 140). This kind of fame may seem easy to attain and, therefore, many individuals strive to become Instafamous in various niche markets. Marwick adds that Instagram's mobile-based usage and features such as Instagram stories create an authentic and truthful atmosphere that tweets and blog posts cannot create. Moreover, Instagram microcelebrities use a set of self-presentation techniques that are, according to Marwick (2015, 157), "not unique to the Instafamous but are common to anyone trying to boost an online audience". In the attention economy, page views and clicks determine one's success and online status and, therefore, they are what the Instafamous try to accumulate.

Instagram offers influencers better creative tools than other social media channels (Casaló et al. 2018) and, thus, it is the central channel in influencer marketing today (Salpini 2017; Statista 2018; Williams 2018). Lee et al. (2015) add that Instagram users present their lifestyle, tastes and personalities through images: "Photographs are much better than texts for self-expression and impression management, since the myth of photographic truth lends photography a credibility that text can lack." Marwick (2015, 143) agrees that since Instagram consists mainly of photographs, it intensifies the importance of visual self-presentation. Therefore, Instagram has become the new, empowering self-presentation medium, especially among the young. (Lee et al. 2015, 555.)

There is not universal agreement on how to define a micro-influencer. Micro-influencers are generally considered to be people who have a relatively high number of followers on social media channels. However, earlier studies agree that it is not necessarily the number of followers that defines a micro-influencer, but how engaged their audience is. Therefore, a person may be perceived as a micro-influencer even with fewer followers. Micro-influencers post about various topics such as lifestyle, fashion, travel, gaming, fitness, food, business and pets. Usually micro-influencers are specific in their posts and concentrate mostly on one subject, which attracts specific niche audiences that are deeply connected to them (Gallagher 2018; Wissman 2018).

Previous research has explored how social media content drives engagement, which compares to Williams et al.'s (1988, 169) concept of involvement, which was seen as the degree to which an individual actively participates with the medium and the information-exchange process. In the world of influencer marketing, engagement is the most crucial meter to measure success and performance (Influencer Marketing Hub 2019).

What makes Instagram a great platform for influencer marketing, in addition to the app's visuality, is its ability to foster engagement. According to Gallagher (2018) the average influencer engagement rate is 5.7 percent across the industry. Instagram's average engagement rate is between two and three percent alone.

2.3.3 Instagram

A fun and quirky way to share life with friends through a series of pictures. Snap a photo with your mobile phone, then choose a filter to transform the image into a memory to keep around forever. We're building Instagram to allow you to experience moments in your friends' lives through pictures as they happen. We imagine a world more connected through photos. (Instagram 2017)

Instagram answered the rising need for a visual, shareable photo album during the rise of camera phones and digital photography. As Dong-Hoo Lee (2005) writes, concerning digital photography in a study of young Korean camera phone users: "It [digital photography]

changes the way we take, print and store photographs [...] The photographer can actively participate in the process of generating, transforming, reprocessing, and, finally, making meaning from images.”

Earlier studies have acknowledged Instagram as a relevant communication channel that needs further research as a marketing channel (Bakhshi et al. 2014; Bevins 2014; Jaakonmäki et al. 2017). Instagram is an image-based application where users can share pictures and videos with other users on the application. Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger released the application in 2010 and sold the company to Facebook in 2012 (Geron 2012).

Instagram is mobile-based, which allows continuous and instant use of the application. Using Instagram filters, the users can easily edit their images on Instagram and post them. Additionally, users can add a textual caption to their images, add a location, tag other users (@), as well as use hashtags (#) that work as search keywords for the application. Instagram usage is based on five different icons. At the very top of the application, there are three icons (Figure 4). From left to right, these are used to take photos for Instagram Stories, open IGTV, and go to the user's personal inbox for direct messages. Below that are the user's Instagram stories, which are presented by a circled profile picture; by clicking on any of them, the user can view other users' Instagram Stories posts.



Figure 4. Instagram application

As for the icons at the bottom of the screen, *Home tab* is the page the user is taken to each time they open the app, and it acts as a central hub for everything Instagram has to offer. By scrolling down, the user can easily browse through an endless number of images posted by others; this forms the news feed of the application, which is constructed by pictures posted by other people and by hashtags the user follows.

The *magnifying glass icon* redirects the user to the *explore page*, where the user can search for themes, hashtags, people or places. Here, Instagram suggests content which might be

interesting for specific users based on their earlier searches, likes and following. The *plus icon* in the middle of the action bar enables the user to either take pictures at the scene and post them, or download existing images or videos from the users' phone and post them.

The *heart icon* tells the users whether they have new followers, new likes or comments. By clicking on the *profile icon*, the user sees their own user account, which is referred to as a *feed*. All the pictures and videos that the user publishes will be saved on the user's feed as if they were in a photo album. On Instagram, success is measured by the number of followers and by the engagement a post gets through likes and comments. Instagram likes represent acceptance and, furthermore, can be seen as an indicator of popularity, peer attention and validation (Chua & Chang 2016).

A unique feature of Instagram, which is partly responsible for the application's popularity, are *filters* that users can easily add to their photos to enhance them (Figure 5). Marwick (2015, 144) states that these filters create a "normative presumption of digital manipulation". Many Instagram photos are highly edited, to the point where a popular hashtag "#nofilter" was created for unedited photos.

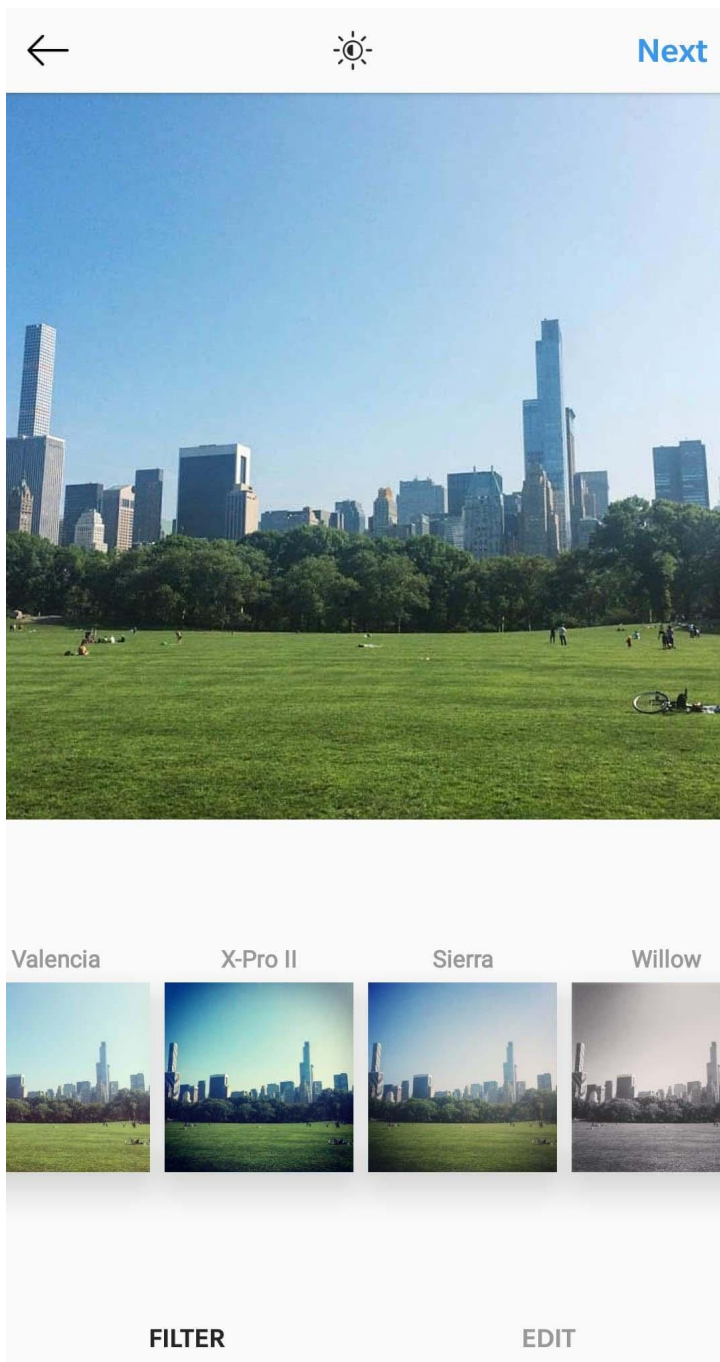


Figure 5. Instagram filters

The usage of filters has also created new phenomena on Instagram. Many influencers show their images before and after editing, and have created their own “editing presets”. Editing presets are a set of filters which influencers have created and use on their own images. By buying the influencers’ editing presets, the followers have a chance to build a feed that is as visually appealing as that of the influencers.

2.4 Synthesis of the theoretical framework

Research theory guides the researcher to literature that individually or collectively provides information that contributes to interpretation and best explains, informs and contextualises the findings of research (Goulding 1998, 51). Previous marketing research notes that it is crucial for brands, businesses and marketers to understand consumers' perceptions, mental models and the perceived personal relevance of a product, brand or service from the consumers' point of view. Mental models include attitudes, symbols, actions, perceptions, personal values, images, symbols, goals and memories of past consumption events. Consumers' mental models, therefore, are interpreted meanings that are formed in connection with a brand or product and are the most fundamental influence on consumer behaviour. (Christensen & Olson 2002, 478.)

In the present study, the aim is to understand consumers' mental models from both content and structure perspectives. Content refers to the personal meanings within mental models, whereas structure is the linkage and order between different content (Christensen & Olson 2002, 479). Moreover, both the content and the structure of mental models are important when trying to understand meanings and meaning construction; therefore, both of them are addressed in this study.

What affects the construction of mental models is multidimensional. In accordance with earlier research from various fields such as psychology, sociology and mass communication, the present study is based on the assumption that personal history, memories, values, culture, language, beliefs and social relations affect an individual's meaning construction and formation. Furthermore, social networks, which today are both virtual and face-to-face, affect a person's meaning formation and value hierarchy. It cannot be neglected that an individual's behaviour is also based on the influence, information and opinions of others. Moreover, meanings are context-bound and vary according to context. In this study, the consumption context is micro-influencer-generated content on Instagram, and the individual meanings presented are a mixture of unique and common meanings.

Based on social influence theory and social network theory, people tend to be homophilous when forming relationships with others and tend to build relationships with people with whom

they identify. An individual goes through cognitive processes that determine to whom they feel related. A person perceives different kinds of attitudes, behaviours and feelings in different kinds of social contexts and compares them to create a social frame of reference. The social frame of reference determines who is perceived as being a fit or similar (Abrams & Hogg 1990, 196). It is assumed in this study that these factors also apply to social media and help to explain influencer following.

As noted earlier, this study is consistent with the assumptions of the uses and gratification theory that motives and individual differences predict social media and content usage, and that people use media to satisfy underlying needs and interests. In addition, needs and motives are influenced by social (background, psychological characteristics, life situation) and societal structures, and individual differences such as gender, personality and age also have an impact on a person's media usage (Rosengren 1974). Furthermore, media behaviour is motivated, goal-directed and purposive (Rubin et al. 2003), and communication behaviour, such as the use, interpretation and selection of media, is influenced by motivation (Haridakis & Hanson 2009, 318). Moreover, people use social media for social interaction, information seeking, pastimes, entertainment, relaxation, expressing opinions, surveillance of others, communicatory utility and convenience utility (Whiting & Williams 2013).

Visual social semiotics stresses that an image itself is a social process. Images are understood as representations which are produced by the makers, who are affected by their cultural, social and physiological backgrounds, interests and the context in which the representation is produced. Meanings in an image are therefore a negotiation between the producer and the viewer, and reflect individual values, attitudes and political, social and cultural beliefs. (Harrison 2003, 47.) In the present study, meanings are understood to be produced between the content of the micro-influencers and the interpretation of the follower. Images and other visual material are means to construct and form social meanings and norms. (Hand 2017, 226; Seppänen 2001.) Based on these theoretical assumptions and earlier findings, a theoretical framework was created for the present study (Figure 6 below).

Meaning construction through micro-influencer-generated content on Instagram

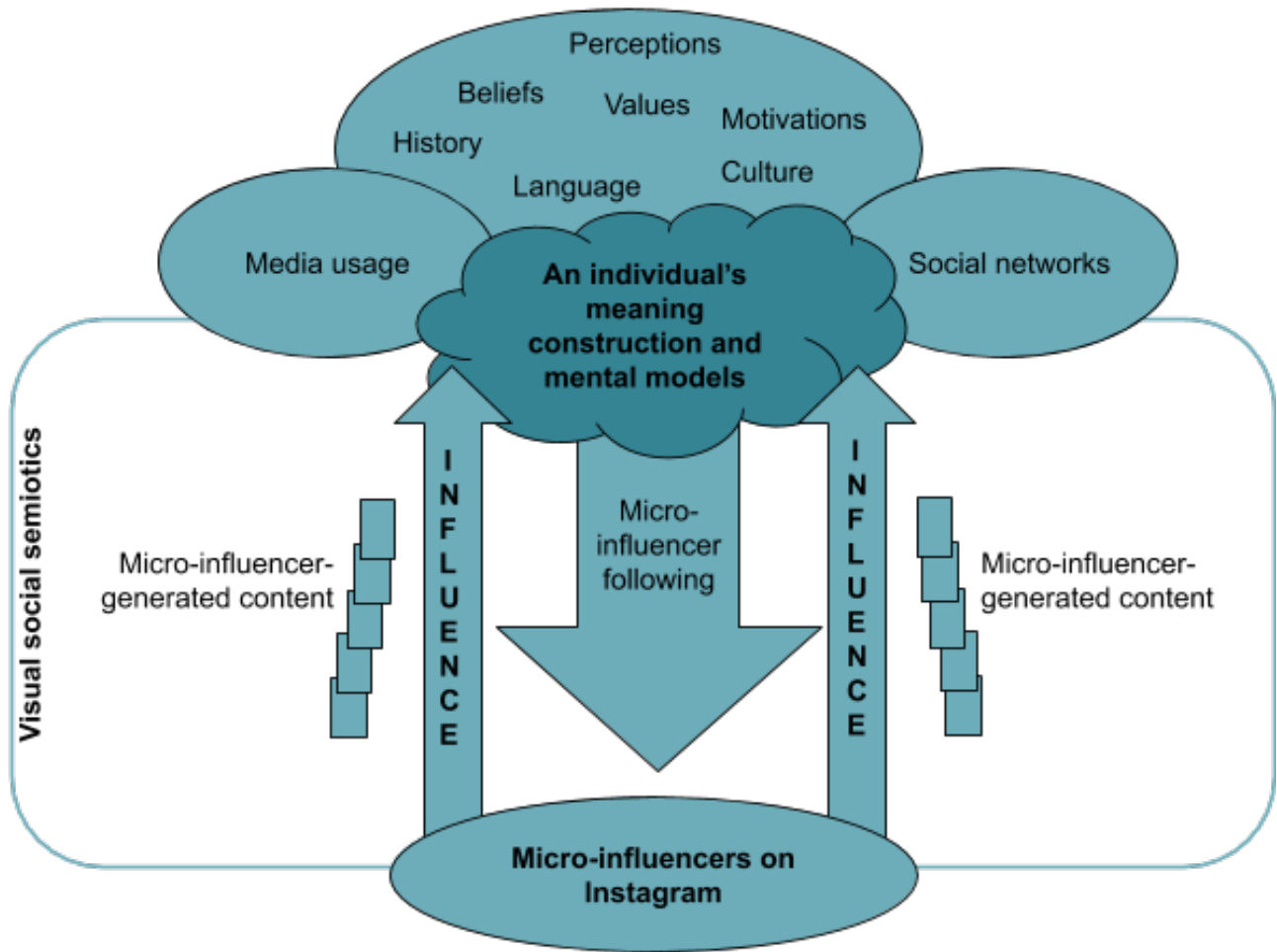


Figure 6. Theoretical framework of the study

Hence, this study seeks to understand how meanings are constructed through micro-influencer-generated content on Instagram and how these meanings affect the follower through the following research questions:

1. How are meanings constructed through Instagram micro-influencers' content and how are they interpreted by the micro-influencers' followers?
2. What motives of the follower explain micro-influencer following?

A projective method that is able to grasp individuals' true thoughts, meanings, perceptions, feelings and attitudes was chosen for this research to develop rich mental models and to understand the meanings that are formed through micro-influencer following.

3 CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH

3.1 Research philosophy

Easterby-Smith et al. (2012) state that defining the research philosophy helps in choosing the overall research strategy with which the researcher wants to proceed and clarifies how the researcher will gather data, interpret data and answer the research questions. According to Proctor (1998), research philosophy answers to ontological (what is the nature of reality), epistemological (what can be known) and methodological (how can a researcher discover what they believe they know) aspects. Nowadays, most marketing researchers are in favour of ontological, epistemological, and methodological pluralism (Kavanagh 1994; Kwan & Tsang 2001; Järvensivu & Törnroos 2010, 100).

The two basic philosophical assumptions of how knowledge can be gained are the positivist and idealist views. The logical positivist view seeks facts and causes of social phenomena without regard for the subjective states of the individual. On the opposite side, idealists try to gain understanding of human behaviour from the individual's perspective and frame of reference (Deshpande 1983, 101–104). The present study follows the idealist, qualitative paradigm. A paradigm, according to Kuhn (1962), is a set of linked assumptions about the world that have been acknowledged and shared by scientists. Understanding the nature of the paradigm enables the researcher to determine what problems and questions need to be addressed and what method will provide an answer to them (Deshpande 1983, 102).

Within the research field, an understanding has unfolded that “knowledge is a matter of both empirical observation and consensus” (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2010, 100). Hackley (1998, 130) argues that effective theory building in marketing “must be founded on a reflexive understanding of how meaning is constructed in the social world in order to be meaningful in and to the social world of marketing”.

The present study aligns with social constructionist researchers, who tend to seek an understanding of phenomena through structure, individual experiences, meanings and discourses (Hackley 1998, 127). Truth is understood to derive from empirical data, and scientific knowledge is a product of social negotiation (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2010, 101).

The aim of social constructionism is to reveal a structure of meanings that are formed within the social processes of individuals and to understand behaviour and the world from the participants' frame of reference. Social constructionism focuses on the individuals' interpretations of their experiences and, thus, enables the researcher to move closer to a meaningful engagement with the phenomena and the social world of the participants. (Hackley 1998, 130.)

Moreover, the aim of my study is to qualitatively identify the different ways in which people experience, perceive, conceptualize and understand micro-influencer following and the meanings arising from the content. According to Sidani and Sechrest (1996, 296), qualitative research is based on a relativistic, constructivist ontology that assumes that there is no objective reality. Since meanings deriving from micro-influencer following are formed through social interaction in different experiences, times and contexts, this study aligns with the subjective ontological assumption that there are multiple, subjective realities that are formed by individuals in different experiences and situations. Humans are not objects; therefore, behaviour, perceptions, feelings and attitudes affect and influence us. Thus, reality is subjective and is perceived and interpreted individually through experiences. In accordance, this study is grounded in the assumption that reality is influenced by context, situations and social constructions such as culture, gender and beliefs and, therefore, is subjective by nature (Crossan 2003, 51–52). According to Fetterman (1988), these realities that people perceive are more important than an objective reality, because individuals act on what they believe.

The aim of qualitative research is to understand experiences and behaviours from the individual's perspective and constitute a set of different meanings and a structure relating to the different meanings (Sidani & Sechrest 1996, 302; Åkerlind 2012, 323). This structure provides a holistic view of the studied phenomena with a range of meanings and possible ways of experiencing the phenomena, despite the fact that participants may perceive the same phenomena differently. To support this idea, all of the interviews in the present study and expressions of meanings are seen as a whole, with similarities and differences, and, thus, the interviews are in unison with one another. (Åkerlind 2012, 323.)

Moreover, this study aligns with the social constructionist view that reality and the social world can only be understood through subjective interpretation, acknowledging that the

researcher is interactive with the phenomena and that the phenomenal aspects cannot be divided into "causes and effects" (Hirschman 1986, 238–239; Leitch et al. 2010, 70). Within the interview setting, the construction of meanings is significantly shaped by interaction between the participants and the researchers and, therefore, reflexivity of the researcher is crucial. Reflexivity is necessary in all qualitative research and, thus, the researcher needs to have an understanding and acknowledge their influence on the interview and the process. (Hackley 1998, 129.) The epistemological basis of the present study is to understand human behaviour by getting close to the participants and entering their world of reality by “capturing the actual meanings and interpretations that actors subjectively ascribe to the phenomena in order to describe and explain their behaviour” (Johnson et al. 2006, 132). In addition, according to the precepts of phenomenological philosophy, “human actions and interpretations of experiences are guided by a ‘stock of knowledge’ handed down to them through language and cultural and social practices” (Sidani & Sechrest 1996, 302).

3.2 Research strategy

The aim of qualitative research is to clarify and describe human experience as it occurs in people's lives (Polkinghorne 2005, 137). Understanding meanings is a complex process because an individual's meanings are connected with different events, people and objects. However, the function of qualitative research is to construct meaning, and the research method has the unique goal of nurturing meaning-making processes (Krauss 2005). One of the advantages of in-depth interviews when studying social media is that they help avoid the thought of social media as merely a platform, when actually social media is, according to Hand (2017, 237), a “complex range of situated meaningful practices”. Moreover, a hermeneutic approach may help to understand and manage consumers' meaning-based relationships to brands, services, products and promotions.

A hermeneutic approach assumes that consumption meanings are consistently related to meanings that derive from a person's personal history and, in broader terms, from historically formed cultural meanings. (Thompson 1997, 439.) Therefore, consumers are self-narrators who tell about their experiences, highlighting the important meanings in their consumption narratives, and reflect and interpret meanings in terms of their historical life events and broader life narratives. Personalized meanings are born through a dialogical relationship

where focal experiences also influence the interpretive standpoint. (Thompson 1997, 441.) According to Walker and Olson (1991, 111) "marketers need models to analyse and interpret how consumers perceive products in relation to themselves"; thus, a hermeneutic interpretation is pertinent in marketing research.

The present study started with gathering knowledge and relative theories and previous research to build a holistic understanding of the subject and phenomena studied. Afterwards, the interview model was created and further tested to confirm the validity of the process before the actual interviews. Ten face-to-face interviews were conducted between December 2018 and February 2019 in Finland and in Canada to gather information-rich data.

After coding and categorizing, relationships and linkages between constructs and categories were coded. The individual mental maps, with their most commonly occurring themes and relationships, served as a base for the creation of the consensus map.

The conducting, interpretation and analysis of the interviews unfolded simultaneously. After the interviews, the researcher went back to analyse and interpret individual mental maps repeatedly during the analysis phase. The interviews were listened to several times in order to interpret the linkages and meanings correctly and to confirm the validity of the interpretations.

3.2.1 The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique

To understand the meanings constructed through Instagram content and the reasons behind following a specific influencer, it is important to choose a method that is able to grasp individuals' true thoughts, meanings, perceptions and attitudes. The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique is used to extract consumers' meanings concerning the personal relevance of the topic (Christensen & Olson 2002, 478) and meanings that are significant and personally important to the consumer. Thus, the participants in this research were interviewed using a modified version of the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique.

ZMET analysis is a hybrid method that consists of visual neuroscience, visual anthropology, literary criticism, semiotics, cognitive neuroscience, phototherapy and mental imagery as well as verbal and nonverbal communication (Coulter 2006, 400). ZMET can give insight into consumers' attitudes towards companies, brands, products, brand equity, product concepts and designs, product usage and purchase experiences, life experiences, and consumption (Catchings-Castello 2000, 8). According to Zaltman and Coulter (1994), images which are "basic, information-rich and attribute-laden" are the entry points to understanding the customer (Catchings-Castello 2000, 10).

ZMET is an enriching research technique that offers insight into the consumer's thoughts and feelings, since the images (the source of data) analysed and discussed during the interview are informant-driven (Coulter 2006, 400). Therefore, ZMET analysis as a research method may bring up meanings and feelings that otherwise would not be identified. As Zaltman (1995) acknowledges: "important opportunities to learn from consumers are missed by ignoring nonverbal channels of communication as part of the research process" (Zaltman & Coulter 1995, 36). In order to understand the meanings constructed through micro-influencers' content on Instagram (as earlier stated, Instagram is the most essential channel in influencer marketing), the informants were asked to bring content solely from Instagram to discuss during the interview. Usually, ZMET allows participants to gather images from different sources such as magazines and books or produce images themselves. However, to truly understand meanings that arise from micro-influencer content on Instagram, only influencer-generated content (images and videos) from Instagram was used in this study. Due to the visuality and the features the application enables for influencer marketing, and because influencer-generated content is mainly what users encounter on Instagram, this restriction was seen as the best way to fulfil the purposes of this study.

ZMET analysis was created to better understand the hidden meanings and thoughts of consumers since thoughts occur as a pattern of neural activity and, hence, verbal communication lacks deep understanding of all the meanings behind behaviour and thoughts (Coulter 2006, 400). There are two theoretical assumptions in ZMET that explain why ZMET as a research method is ideal for this study. First of all, ZMET acknowledges that much of the content of consumers' mental structures is unconscious. Therefore, people need to have tools, like metaphors, to elicit these unconscious thoughts and structures. Secondly, ZMET recognizes that images serve as a projective medium that helps people to

communicate and identify hidden meanings. Cognitive scientists agree that thoughts are based on images and that people use language to communicate these mental images. (Christensen & Olson 2002, 481.) Therefore, ZMET was found to be the best method for understanding individuals' meanings and mental construction.

In addition, ZMET offers a ten-step guide to the one-on-one interviews that are intended to stimulate the individual's true feelings about the topic (Catchings-Castello 2000, 7). Nevertheless, the steps that are used vary according to the research problem and the intended use of the data (Zaltman & Coulter 1995, 40); hence, only a subset of these steps might finally be used. In the present study, eight steps of ZMET were used, including additional questions about the participants' background to better understand the meaning formation of the individual. In addition, informants were also asked if any negative thoughts, feelings or attitudes emerge from the micro-influencer-generated content they had selected. This gives a new perspective on the subject, enables comparison between the content that the informant finds intriguing and the content they do not enjoy, and may make it possible to discover the meanings behind meaningful content and why individuals choose to follow a specific influencer but refuse to follow another. Moreover, the negative emotions give insight into how a person perceives certain kinds of content or people, and why these kinds of content and people arouse negative thoughts. Micro-influencers have also been criticized for creating a non-realistic, photo-manipulated "reality" which may have many negative outcomes. For these reasons, the negative aspects of influencing were also discussed during the interviews.

ZMET as a method is a mixture of semi-structured, in-depth personal interviews that focus on visual images that the informant brings to the interview (Coulter 2006, 400). The informants were told about the research topic and had five to ten days to gather content from the micro-influencers' Instagram account. The gathered content indicated what following an Instagram micro-influencer means to the informants and was used as a basis of discussion and meaning finding during the interviews. (Zaltman & Coulter 1995, 40.)

The interview process started with *storytelling*, where the informant told the stories behind the content they had selected. Interviewees discussed the content they had selected through narratives and metaphors which serve as ways to encode meanings and characterize mental models (Zaltman & Coulter 1995, 36). Zaltman gives a specific rule not to interpret

or analyse anything during this phase, so the interviewer's role is simply to listen. In the next step, the participants told the researcher about their background. By doing these steps in this order, the participants told about their background in a way that was somehow related to why they chose the specific micro-influencer for the interview, partly unconsciously. Participants told, for example, how following a particular influencer was connected to their background, their hobbies or their work, and how they had found and how long they had been following the micro-influencer.

Missed issues and images is a step used to understand issues behind the gathering of the content. It brings knowledge to the researcher of content the informant would have liked to find to present the topic but did not. Here, the informant is able to tell what the content would look like. Three of the participants reported missing images or content:

I had this memory of a picture that reminded me of the dangers associated with climbing, but I couldn't find it. (J)

In the *sorting task* step, the informant formed separate piles of the content they had selected to create themes. The interviewer also asked the informants to name these piles and explain why the content was sorted in this manner. After these steps came the *construct elicitation* step, which consists of using the Kelly Repertory Grid technique and the laddering technique to understand constructs behind action and thinking and relationships among these constructs. Kelly (1955) notes that individuals' constructs are formed by individual experiences and that individuals use their own personal constructs to understand and interpret the world, events and experiences around them. Therefore, these constructs are irregular and personal in nature. However, two or more individuals may share constructs depending on how similar their personal construct systems are. (Tan & Hunter 2002, 42.)

In the construct elicitation step, the interviewer selected three images and placed them in front of the interviewee. The interviewee needed to explain to the interviewer how two of the images are alike and how the third differs from the others in order to produce contrasting poles for the construct. This was repeated until the interviewee no longer came up with new meanings or constructs and all relevant constructs were identified. In this study, an average of eight times was enough to grasp all the meanings and constructs. Previous research suggests that seven to ten triads are sufficient to elicit all of the participant's constructs (Tan

& Hunter 2002, 46). Participants found the construct elicitation to be the hardest part of the interview process.

Afterwards, in the ZMET method, the informant chooses the *most representative picture* and an *opposite image*. In the present study, through the opposite image, most of the interviewees presented a mental image of content that would make them unfollow the influencer they had chosen. This revealed some interesting attributes and characteristics of the influencer and meanings within content that were not aligned with the followers' value systems. According to Zaltman (1995), the next step is *sensory images*, which is based on other senses and in which the informant describes the tastes, senses, sounds and smells that do or do not represent the topic discussed. In the present study, the informants reported:

Blue and green are peaceful colours to me. Peaceful means that feeling when you're not in a rush to go anywhere, you're content, you're not agitated; it's the time from early morning to early afternoon, when it's sunny and you're being comfortable but not sleepy. (E)

The feeling I get is almost a mix of tastes like something spicy but something sweet at the same time. You have a chili mixed with orange. Because you have to peel to see what good is inside, but at the same time it's a little bit spicy. You see him do the climbs and it's like hot and impressive. But the orange is sweet because he stays humble to himself and then you have a kind of a bitterness of the outside peel that you throw away because this guy is always being positive and showing positivity, so you remove the bitter outside and you're left with a chili orange. You remove the bitterness, all the negative, and then the orange is left sweet. (F)

The *mental map* is a map of the research topic created by the informant, which is formed out of the emerged constructs and meanings and the relationships between these constructs (Zaltman & Coulter 1995, 40–43). The interviewees created the mental maps and the interviewer helped them fill in the map if some of the topics that were discussed during the interview were not emerging in the mental map. The interviewer gave the interviewee time to fill out the mental map before helping, in order to not influence the creation of the mental map too much. Polkinghorne (2005, 143) states that it is the interviewer's job to dig into deeper levels throughout the interview, to help unravel the experience the interviewee is

describing and to get more nuanced descriptions of these experiences. Additionally, it is up to the skilled judgement of the interviewer to move the conversation along.

ZMET as a research method gives deep insight into the research topic; the informants are able to examine their thoughts, meanings and behaviour and then are able to examine them during the interview together with the researcher. Moreover, for all the reasons stated in this section, ZMET not only gives insight to the researcher but also contributes to producing knowledge to the consumer about their own thoughts and behaviour. Many participants mentioned meanings that were brought up during the interview that they were not aware of before the interview. ZMET acknowledges that all thoughts cannot be described textually and that the informants may be able to better express their feelings through images. Many of the informants in the present study also noted after the interview that they felt that the interviewer now knew them better than even some of their friends. This shows how deep and intimate some of the interviews were.

ZMET focuses on understanding and identifying core themes among informants; thus, four to five in-depth interviews can provide up to 90 percent of the information available from a larger set of interviews (Coulter 2006, 401). On the other hand, Catchings-Castello (2000) argues that due to the small sample size, “estimations cannot be made regarding the general population, nor can associations be made between constructs” (Catchings-Castello 2000, 12). However, the object of qualitative research is to form a rich and deep understanding of a specific research topic and, therefore, ZMET is an ideal method to research this phenomenon.

3.2.2 Data generation

In qualitative research the purpose of data gathering is to provide evidence for the investigated experience through accounts that people have given about the specific experience (Polkinghorne 2005, 138).

Patton (1990, 169) noted that it is important to select “information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research”. For data-generation in the present

study, ten individuals (Table 1) were recruited by using the researcher's own network and by using the purposive sampling. The interviews were conducted in Tampere, Finland and in Ottawa, Canada between December 2018 and February 2019. According to Merriam (2002, 12), in qualitative research it is crucial to select a sample from which the most can be learned. In the present study, the purpose was to understand the meanings behind following a micro-influencer from the perspective of the participants. The main criterion for choosing interviewees was that the participant needed to actively follow a micro-influencer on Instagram. Participants chose an Instagram micro-influencer that they actively follow with the restriction that the account needs to have between 10,000 and 500,000 followers to be regarded as a micro-influencer. Table 1 below presents basic information about the participants in the study.

Table 1. Overview of the participants

| Participants | Gender | Age | Nationality | Profession | Followed micro-influencer | Interview duration |
|---------------------|---------------|------------|--------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Participant A | Female | 26 | Finnish | Sales consultant | Eveliina Tistelgren | 90 min |
| Participant B | Female | 24 | Finnish | Content specialist | Annika Ollila | 65 min |
| Participant C | Female | 23 | Finnish | Student | Erica Klein | 80 min |
| Participant D | Male | 27 | Finnish | Communication manager | Daniel Taipale | 70 min |
| Participant E | Female | 22 | Canadian | Analyst/researcher | Andrea Sanders | 50 min |
| Participant F | Male | 20 | French Canadian | Cook | Adam Ondra | 90 min |
| Participant G | Male | 21 | Mexican | Student | Callen Schaub | 65 min |
| Participant H | Female | 20 | Dutch | Student | Hope Noelle Lassiter | 50 min |
| Participant I | Female | 21 | Belgian | Student | Emilie Liégeois | 50 min |
| Participant J | Male | 19 | Canadian/American | Student | Mary Catherine Eden | 75 min |

Information on how to prepare for the interview was sent to every participant after they had been selected (Appendix 1). The participants gathered 8–10 images that, in their opinion, resembled what following an Instagram micro-influencer, whom they had chosen, means to them. After a period of 5–10 days of gathering the images, participants came to a one-on-one interview. The interviews lasted from 50–90 minutes. ZMET offers researchers guidelines and rules to follow in producing, analysing and interpreting informants' data. However, qualitative interviewing cannot fully be constrained to a set of rules or techniques due to individual differences in interviewees and the unpredictable flow of a research conversation (Polkinghorne 2005, 143). Therefore, the eight steps of ZMET were covered in all interviews but acted mostly as a guideline for the interviews. In some cases, the conversation was mostly led by the interviewees, where the researcher left room for the interviewee to tell their story and acted more as a listener. In some cases, the interviewees needed more guidance from the researcher and more time to get into the meanings behind their experiences and behaviour. Each interview was therefore unique in nature and adapted to the interviewees' needs, desires and abilities to express themselves.

In addition, all of the interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewee. Overall, over 11 hours of data were recorded. Four interviews were conducted in Finnish and the rest in English. The Finnish interviews were later translated into English by the interviewer. Moreover, each interviewee created a mental map at the end of the interview. These mental maps represented the most important meanings and constructs to the interviewee. After all the interviews were conducted, a consensus map of the main themes was created in accordance with Zaltman's suggestions for further data analysis.

3.2.3 Data analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research identifies factors that influence an individual's or a group's unique meaning (Krauss 2005, 763). Krauss (2005, 764) states that there are two epistemological principles in qualitative data analysis. First of all, to fully understand the meaning formation of other people, there needs to be face-to-face interaction, because it is the fullest way of participating in the mind of another person. All ten interviews in this research were conducted individually face-to-face. Secondly, a person has to participate in another person's mind to gain social knowledge. Social knowledge is "knowledge of doing",

which contains activities such as ways of being social, how to be a part of a group, follow routines and interact with others. Data analysis in qualitative research attempts to acquire social knowledge of others.

All ten interviews were partially transcribed, and a database was created so further analysis could be conducted. The transcripts were imported to a software program called Atlas to help the analysis. Glaser's (1965) *constant comparative method* was used when analysing data. The constant comparative method forces the researcher to go back to the data and reflect on their interpretations constantly by interacting with the interview transcripts, which thereby produces valid interpretations. In Atlas, meanings and constructs that emerged frequently were categorized and themed. Furthermore, each construct was compared to the previous construct in the same category, which, according to Glaser (1965, 439), provides "the theoretical properties of the category". These theoretical properties are important for understanding the category's dimensions, consequences and relations to other categories (Glaser 1965, 439).

After coding and categorizing, relationships and linkage between constructs and categories were coded. Every individual mental map was reread, and the interviews were listened to repeatedly in order to interpret the linkages correctly. The individual mental maps, with their most commonly occurring themes and relationships, served as the base for the consensus map. Zaltman has suggested that the consensus map holds the meanings and constructs that are presented in at least 80% of the individual mental maps. These suggestions and rules were followed when creating the consensus map.

4 MEANINGS BEHIND INSTAGRAM'S MICRO-INFLUENCER FOLLOWING

4.1 Consensus map of users' meanings behind Instagram micro-influencer following

This section introduces the findings of the ten ZMET interviews conducted for the present study in order to answer the research questions; it also presents the consensus map of the participants' meaning constructs behind their Instagram micro-influencer following. An overview of the micro-influencers chosen by the interviewees is presented and discussed. The meaning constructs resulting from the consensus map and linkages between the constructs are discussed further by introducing each construct, meaning and sub-meaning.

The meaning constructs found in this research are specific to this study, but they are evaluated and further discussed in order to produce broader knowledge about meaning construction and the various factors behind influencer following. The study's findings are also analysed in regard to earlier findings and existing research. The theoretical framework will be re-evaluated in the last paragraph of this section and complemented in the light of the study's findings.

First, to understand how meanings are constructed within micro-influencer following, it is crucial to understand why the participants chose a certain micro-influencer to introduce to the researcher. All of the participants confirmed that they follow multiple micro-influencers on Instagram. Therefore, an interesting question arose: why did the participants choose this specific micro-influencer for the interview and not another? Most of the participants explained that they chose the first micro-influencer who came to mind. Interestingly, in all of the cases, the micro-influencer was related to the hobbies and interests of the participant. When the participants were asked why they chose this micro-influencer, the answer included an explanation that was linked to the participant's life, background, interests and hobbies.

All of the participants found something unique and interesting in the content the micro-influencer produced that distinguished that particular micro-influencer from all the others. It can be concluded that the choice the participants made when choosing a micro-influencer for this research is meaningful for them and that the subject that the micro-influencer posts

about (photography, art, sports, fashion etc.) is also meaningful and acts as a crucial factor when someone is choosing to follow someone on Instagram. Consequently, understanding what is meaningful for the participants in their lives was the first step in gaining social knowledge of the meanings and meaning construction behind Instagram's micro-influencer following. Social knowledge, as stated previously, is "knowledge of doing" which contains activities such as ways of being social, how to be a part of a group, follow routines and interact with others. After this mutual ground and comprehension was found, understanding the thoughts and thinking of the participant and acquiring social knowledge was possible for the researcher. Table 2 below shows the micro-influencers chosen by the participants for the present study.

Table 2. Overview of the micro-influencers chosen by the interviewees

| Micro-influencer | Nationality | Area of specialties | Number of followers |
|--|--------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Eveliina Tistelgren (eevsku) | Finnish | Sports | 52,500 |
| Annika Ollila (annikaollila) | Finnish | Lifestyle/fashion | 92,400 |
| Erica Klein (erica_klein) | American | Dance | 222,000 |
| Daniel Taipale (dansmoe) | Finnish | Photography/ adventure | 201,000 |
| Andrea Sanders (bezerowastegirl) | American | Bio-mindfulness | 85,500 |
| Adam Ondra (adam.ondra) | Czech | Rock climbing | 360,000 |
| Callen Schaub (callenschaub) | Canadian | Art | 135,000 |
| Hope Noelle Lassiter (hope.noelle.on.ice) | American | Figure skating | 10,900 |
| Emilie Liégeois (noblog.justlove) | Belgian | Lifestyle/parenting | 38,400 |
| Mary Catherine Eden (tradprincess) | American | Rock climbing/ photography | 58,900 |

The consensus map in Figure 7 below shows four emerging meaning constructs and factors behind Instagram's micro-influencer following that emerged from every interview: 1) *valuing aesthetic, appealing and unique content*; 2) *the personality and lifestyle presented by the micro-influencer*; 3) *admiration, inspiration and motivation*; and 4) *identifying with the influencer*. Furthermore, all of these meaning constructs and factors can be presented in hierarchical order in the sense that the first one affects the second one and so forth. Eventually, all of the meaning constructs and factors were linked to the following core meanings (which are presented in the centre of the consensus map): 1) *a sense of belongingness*; 2) *building up the self*; 3) *seeking advice*; and 4) *seeking validation for the participants' own lives, experiences, values and choices*.

The consensus map presents the meaning constructs and the factors that explain micro-influencer following, the linkage between the different constructs through lines, and the various topics and themes that are found under each meaning construct. The red-coloured meanings indicate negative themes and emotions that emerged from the constructs.

All of the meanings and factors that emerged from the data were connected to each other but also to the participants' personal history, memories, values, culture, language, beliefs and social relations. It is important to acknowledge that these meanings and factors were intertwined and generally discussed together and are commonly much more complex but are separated in this analysis in order to gain deeper understanding of each meaning and the subthemes. The factors and reasons that resulted in the following in the beginning (a recommendation or a suggestion by a friend, a certain situation in life, finding the account by accident or appealing content) may in themselves be meanings or may trigger further meaning construction for the followers. However, in the end, these factors and reasons lead to meanings and their formation, and form meaning for the followers. The individuals themselves do not always consciously separate the meanings from each other nor understand where the meanings stem from. However, all of the participants in the present study noted and described the core meanings behind micro-influencer following, whether consciously or subconsciously. Figure 7 below presents the consensus map with factors, meaning constructs and the core meanings reflected by all ten participants.

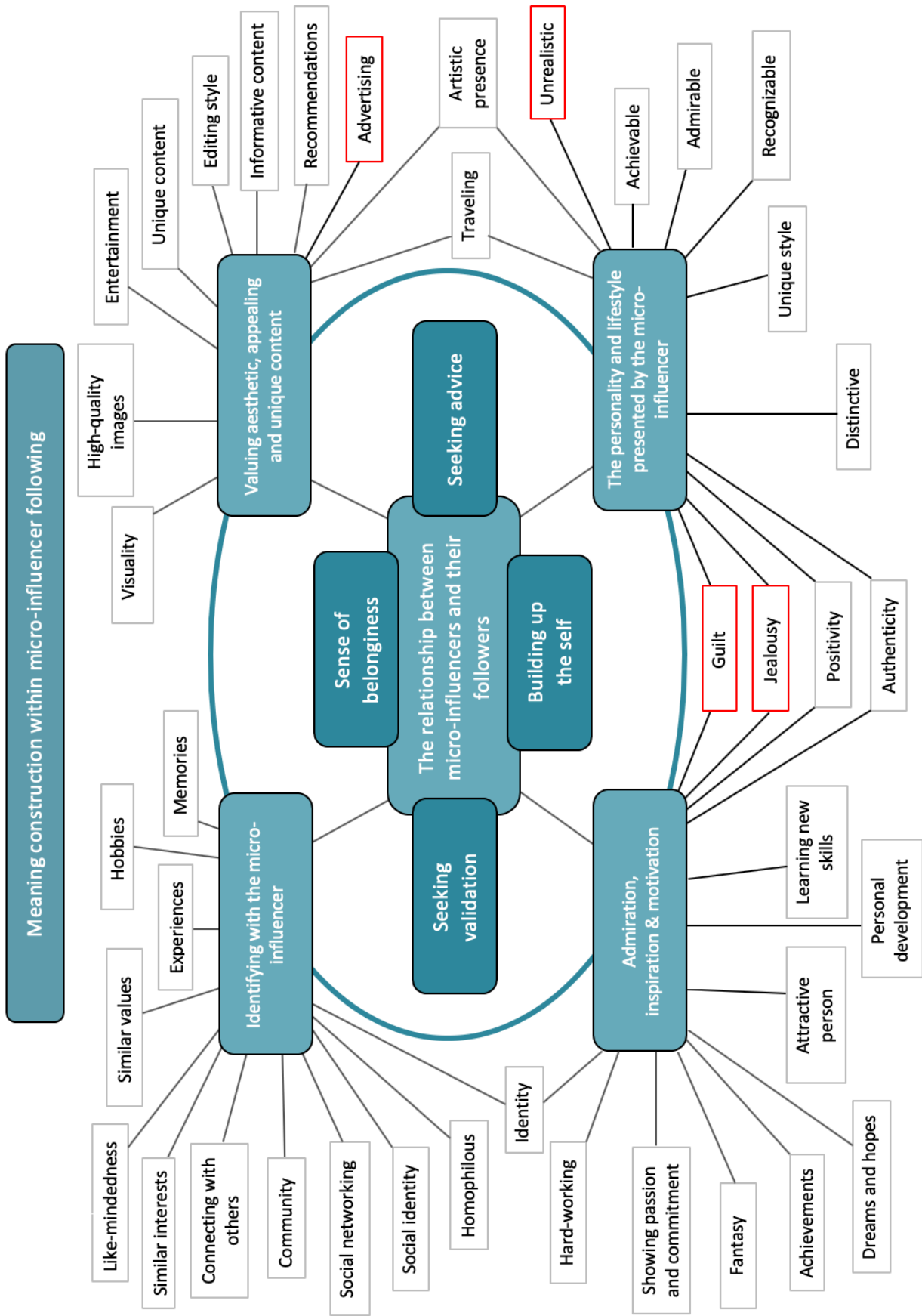


Figure 7: The consensus map of users' meanings behind Instagram micro-influencer following

4.1.1 Valuing aesthetic, appealing and unique content

Visual communication has become a vital part of everyday sociality through the rise of technologies such as mobile phones that have visuality embedded in them (Hand 2017, 235). Instagram is based on visuality and, therefore, visual aspects of the content created by Instagram users reinforce the inclination to follow someone. Furthermore, creating original, unique and authentic content has been regarded as a way for influencers to resonate with their audience (Jaakonmäki et al. 2017; Marwick 2015). The participants in the present study found appealing content to be one of the main reasons they followed the micro-influencer. Visually appealing content draws the follower to the micro-influencers' feed and also serves as the first touch point in the decision-making process of whether to follow the influencer. Therefore, the visuality of the content plays a critical role in how meanings are formed through the content and whether the message within that content will be noticed and absorbed by the viewer. As one of the participants in this study noted:

She's delicate. I value when people have a unique, personal style. And that's a big thing when I decide who I follow on Instagram. That's what I am looking for: a personal, unique style. (C)

All of the participants mentioned quality when describing the content. Quality meant that the content was technically proficient and reflected professionalism through correct lighting, framing and focus:

She has quality pictures and most of them are very professional. I don't like to follow people who have bad quality pictures, so if she only had those pictures, I wouldn't follow her. Quality means a lot: the framing of the pictures and how the pictures are taken. Videos also really mean a lot; I like watching them because they are entertaining, inspiring, and with her it's about how she presents herself. (C)

Moreover, the editing style of the pictures was also an important aspect for participants and clearly was linked to the preferred style of each participant. The editing style of the micro-influencer determined whether the content was perceived as appealing and also reinforced the feeling of identifying with the content and finding it interesting:

I can't follow someone who over-edits their pictures. There's a lot of people on Instagram who edit a lot, but they still make the pictures look real and interesting. The feeling I get from some people is just not something that makes me want to follow them. Of course, I don't know what they are like personality-wise, but their style and content doesn't fit me and it's not similar to my tastes. I also don't know how to edit that much, so maybe that's why it doesn't appeal to me. (D)

Her content appeals to me because I like the style and the filters she uses, they're similar to what I use. (E)

Her feed is visually very harmonious and coherent; she uses the same edit, so all of her pictures are very warm and brown and that's her visual style; it's very distinctive. (B)

In addition, uniqueness was seen as a critical reason to follow a micro-influencer. Uniqueness came from the content itself, the editing style or from the personality or lifestyle presented by the micro-influencer. If the micro-influencer was able to communicate, through their content, something unique and different, it was taken positively by the followers, since Instagram (and other social media channels) are full of content that the consumer sees daily. To stand out, an influencer needs to know how to differentiate themselves from the mass, either through content, personality or style, or come up with a whole new market or perspective:

It's inspiring that he's doing something different than everyone else. Other Instagram profiles are just about the art, but his is also about him and I find that inspiring. (G)

He's an explorer, and these places he travels are not the most common places that people travel to. He shows a different kind of perspective and takes unique images from even the familiar places. That's what makes them so interesting. (D)

In Peircean semiotics, signs are regarded as anything that can stand for or communicate about something else (Eco 1976, 7). Signs are the basis for meanings which can be widely shared or specific to individuals, households and subcultures (Mick 1997, 245–246). Visual images exist as a relatively autonomous semiotic mode in which meanings are transported, made and remade with reference to no other mode but the visual (Unsworth 2001). The

participants in the present study found both shared and individual meanings in the micro-influencers' content. The meaning-construction on Instagram happened through the visual content, both video and image, Instagram stories and the micro-influencers' feeds. It is generally acknowledged that a person's personal history determines how perceptions are framed, and personal histories may cause very different meaning systems across individuals (Thompson 1997, 439). Most of the meanings mentioned by the participants in the present study are shared meanings and are perceived by the viewer as they are represented in an image and how most people would interpret them. So, a picture representing a person climbing would, for most people, mean sports, a hobby, well-being, health, even danger, power or adventure. However, most of the participants were describing unique meanings when going through the images, indicating that the participants were describing meanings that are unique to them, not to others looking at the same image:

He's in the garage of his friend and he just set up a pillar on the roof and he's training on it, and I always had this dream like, once I have a house, I want to build a climbing wall inside and a crack climbing simulator just to train and have a dog beside me. Eventually that's my goal. (F)

This kind of meaning construction formed a strong relation between the follower and the micro-influencer because the meaning formed by the viewer was personal, intimate and relatable. Most of the participants also mentioned that they were looking for a sense of personality in the micro-influencer's content. Hence, the imagery itself was the communication medium on which the followers based their judgement and, thus, was meaningful and significant to them. Therefore, it can be concluded that the image of the lifestyle, personality and values that a micro-influencer creates through their content on Instagram needs to resonate with and be perceived as valuable by the follower and is the core for creating a sense of belongingness, social connectivity and/or similarity with the micro-influencer.

4.1.2 The personality and lifestyle presented by the micro-influencer

Triandis (1989) differentiated three dimensions of a person's self: private, public and collective. The private self is how the person sees themselves – "an assessment of the self

by the self” (Triandis 1989, 507). The public self is the most sensitive self-concept in the evaluation of others and includes interactions and relationships with significant others. The collective self contains the self that is consistent with group identification, including the norms and characteristics that are important to the reference group. (Brewer & Gardner 1996, 84–86; Greenwald & Breckler 1986; Triandis 1989.)

The micro-influencer presents a concept of self through their content on Instagram that they hope will have an impact on the followers. Micro-influencers present a life and a personality that can be seen as admirable and which resonates with the followers’ values, attitudes and personality. As participants in this study affirmed:

This picture has a nice vibe; I feel relaxed and happy when I look at it. It’s also a little bit vulnerable and delicate, which is very much Erica’s [Erica Klein; erica_klein] style.
(C)

The pictures are something that you don’t see on every feed. Like her [Eveliina Tistelgren; eevsku] pictures are different and distinctive. There’s a lot of feeds that are similar, but why I keep watching hers is that she doesn’t just pose and have selfies; she shows who she is and what she does. It’s more real. (A)

The perception of the identity and personality of the micro-influencer is formed through their content, through Instagram Stories, images and videos. The participants found videos to be the best way to express personality, since they involve voice and nonverbal clues that enhance a sense of authenticity and personality that images alone lack:

She does a lot of videos, so I know how she speaks. She has a very unapologetic way of going about herself: she is who she is and she doesn’t apologize for that, she doesn’t filter, which can be a good or a bad thing. But she doesn’t make excuses for who she is, which I think is very cool. (J)

He’s always humble, super nice and super friendly. When he falls, he becomes super angry and he swears in Czech and it’s funny to see, but that’s how much he cares for it [climbing] and how much it means to him and how much he loves the sport. (F)

All of the participants had followed the micro-influencer they chose for the purposes of this study for over a year, the longest for over five years. Thus, the image of the micro-influencer's personality was formed over a long period of time of following, a continuous content stream and involvement from the follower's side to the content. Some participants had a very strong sense of the personality of the micro-influencer even though none of the participants had met the micro-influencer in person:

This picture represents the fact that even if he is the best, he still says that he is not going to be the best and stays true to himself, that there is someone better than him. (F)

The personalities presented by the micro-influencers had features that the followers themselves had or, at least, wanted to have. Hearn and Schoenhoff (2016) found that an authentic and creative public image is essential in social media influencing. Marwick (2015) stated that Instagram's mobile-based usage and features such as Instagram Stories create an authentic and truthful atmosphere that tweets and blog posts alone cannot create. In the present study perceived authenticity created admiration for the influencer, which further explained why the participant chose to follow them:

Her whole thing is simplicity and meaning: You don't have things just because you want them but because they are useful for you. Her pictures reflect that: they are simple and beige, and they are not meant to be that way but it's what her house looks like, so it's not fake. (E)

The authenticity of the content and the life presented in it was, nevertheless, contradictory for most participants in the study. Some of the participants in this research were highly aware of the difference between 'real' life and the life presented by the micro-influencer:

All of these places don't look like this in reality. I think most of the pictures are close to reality but they are not the usual pictures you see, and dansmoe [Daniel Taipale] has probably taken so much time to get this picture, and this water is probably super cold and you wouldn't jump in if you were not doing this for a picture. So everything on Instagram is not really what it looks like. (D)

It's a bit contradictory that she is hiking in Iceland and she doesn't have clothes that are suitable for hiking. It doesn't even look like it's warm enough to go without a jacket. So that tells me that it's a planned and setup picture. (B)

Therefore, it can be seen that the “reality” presented by the micro-influencers was formed, shaped and created as an interplay between micro-influencers content and the followers’ interpretation that is full of signs and meanings. In addition, the lifestyle and personality presented, as well as the interplay between the micro-influencer and the follower, had an impact on the followers’ concept of self and identity. Admiration led to a desire to self-improve and, therefore, affected the followers’ identity formation and self building:

I look up to him and admire his personality, and it makes me a better person. (F)

I admire people who can be so determined, who don't give up. And these things are not self-evident for me, so she reminds and represents determination to me. (A)

To conclude, the micro-influencers’ personality and lifestyle, as presented through their content, need to be perceived as similar and congruent with the personality and lifestyle of the followers or what they wish to be and obtain in order to create meaning and a sense of belongingness. Through appealing, informative and valuable content the followers seek validation of their own experiences and choices and also use the content to build up themselves and their identity.

4.1.4 Admiration, inspiration and motivation

Assael demonstrated already in 1984 that since consumers might want to be symbolically identified and associated with celebrities, they purchase products that celebrities promote. This is why celebrities are effective promoters: they have a symbolic aspirational reference group association (Assael 1984; Kamins 1990, 4). What distinguishes influencers from celebrities is the influencers’ interactive, intimate, accessible and believable image and the relationship they build with their followers (De Veirman et al. 2017, 801). Moreover, influencers are trusted trend setters and tastemakers in specific niches (De Veirman et al. 2017, 798).

All of the participants in the present study mentioned feeling admiration or idolization towards the micro-influencer. The admiration centred on the lifestyle or personality presented by the micro-influencer, with which the follower could identify or relate. The micro-influencer presented something that the follower aspired to do, have or feel:

And I see this guy and he always tries to push himself to the next level, and I want to be doing that like him, doing crazy stuff just to become stronger and a better climber.
(F)

For the majority of the participants, admiration was highly linked to personal and emotional meanings. Most of the participants in this study were seeking validation and motivation to fulfil dreams in their own lives in the micro-influencers' content. Following and, furthermore, admiring the micro-influencer related to the hopes, dreams and ambitions of the participants:

He's really impressive; each time I look at him and his pictures I am like, This is who I want to become... like, This is the version, the better climber that I want to become.
(F)

She's inspirational in the sense that she is making it work and she's just doing what she wants to do. That's the dream. (J)

Through admiration and relatedness, the participants found inspiration and motivation for their own lives and experiences. Since the sense of relatedness to the micro-influencer was strong, the lifestyle or personality traits presented by the micro-influencer were considered achievable and desirable. Therefore, the content that produced these meanings for the followers had an impact and was found to be valuable and meaningful:

I follow her because she's what I aspire to be. She has the same values, but she does them better. She's a bit too extreme, like I have more clothing [laughs], but I like a lot of the values that she represents. It's mindful: you connect with your things, you buy things because you need them, and they are meaningful. A lot of the stuff I had in the past was poor and cheap and I just bought it as an impulse, and I didn't care about it. (E)

When I look at this picture, I think how could I take a picture like this and how much effort would it take for me to produce a picture like this? How would this picture look like if it was mine? (D)

If you want to achieve something, you have to work for it and be determined. That's what she is; she has a fighting attitude and here you can see it in her eyes that she believes in herself, and that is motivating. And it's not only about sports, it applies in every area of your life. To say to yourself that you can do it, that you're doing well. It encourages me to continue and try. (A)

However, admiration also included some negative aspects such as jealousy and guilt. Since the micro-influencers present a lifestyle or personality which they want to be considered admirable, the image that is formed on Instagram through their content might be unrealistic. Generally, social media influencers have been criticized for creating unrealistic perceptions and showing only certain parts of their lives, usually only the successful and beautiful moments. Turner and Lefevre (2017) noted in their study that social media allows for and encourages selective exposure, meaning that users are continuously exposed only to the content of the accounts that they have chosen to follow. This may lead to narrowed exposure and may lead users to think that the behaviour or lifestyle presented in these popular accounts is more normal or common than it actually is. Marwick notes that “*Instafame* is not egalitarian but rather reinforces an existing hierarchy of fame, in which the iconography of glamour, luxury, wealth, good looks, and connections is inscribed in a visual digital medium” (Marwick 2015, 141).

As earlier noted, individuals associate and create meanings through social reference groups and, thus, an individual may be dissatisfied with their own achievements if someone in the reference group is performing better than them. This may result in individuals trying to conform to the kind of behaviour and lifestyle that these accounts present. Accounts that have a large following may be perceived as authorities and influence a large audience through images that depict a certain kind of lifestyle, behaviour or diet. (Turner & Lefevre 2017, 282.) In the interviews for the present study, the participants shared some negative feelings that arose from the micro-influencers' content:

Seeing this picture with her in her dress sometimes makes me feel guilty because I really like buying clothes; I buy new sometimes and I thrift, but I buy new enough even though I cycle my clothes and I also recycle. But when I see her with her local handmade dress that she wears almost every single day, it is not something I will live up to. (E)

In the present study jealousy was another strong negative feeling that arose from the micro-influencers' content. The micro-influencers portray such a flawless and perfect lifestyle on social media that it creates negative emotions for some of the followers. The negative emotions were not always directly associated with a specific micro-influencer but in broader terms with social media influencers and the phenomenon of social media influencing. Thus, an authentic image that an influencer is able to create becomes more vital because a "perfect lifestyle" or "perfect life" might be non-relatable and evoke negative feelings towards the content posted by the influencer:

Of course, I feel resentment because I feel like I have to go to a real job, and everyone else can just travel and post pictures to earn a living. (D)

In order to create relationships with their followers, micro-influencers need to avoid creating negative emotions and try to create content that enhances positive attributes, emotions and values that nurture a sense of self and belongingness. When this degree of meaning is achieved, it leads to a sense of connectedness, where the followers search for advice from the micro-influencers in order to validate their own lives, experiences and choices.

4.1.3 Identifying with the micro-influencer

One of the important components of identification is the drive for self-continuity, meaning that people strive for a consistent sense of self in order to understand themselves and their social world (Kunda 1999). Thus, when a person acknowledges communication from brands or companies that reflects their sense of self, the person is drawn to the organization as a means of self-expression and affiliation (Ahearne et al. 2005, 576). According to Dutton et al. (1994), three principles explain an individual's self-definition: the need for self-continuity, self-distinctiveness, and self-enhancement. (Dutton et al. 1994).

In addition, Granovetter's (1973) *strength of weak ties* theory suggests that people tend to be homophilous and have stronger ties with people to whom they can relate and who are similar to them (Borgatti & Halgin 2011, 1170). All of the respondents in the present study follow micro-influencers to whom they can relate and who present a lifestyle, values, ideology and interests that are similar to theirs. As one participant said:

I can relate to her, as well as her travel locations and tips, and I am also interested in them. She doesn't go to the most expensive restaurants and drink champagne. She has a lot of nature locations which I am interested in. And of course, Sara's travel pictures are also very visually appealing. (B)

According to Romero et al. (2011, 18), influence is formed when the followers can relate to the micro-influencers' content and when the micro-influencers frequently create content which is perceived as valuable. The perceived fit between the micro-influencer and the follower is constructed when personal values, personality and lifestyle of the follower are congruent with the content created by the micro-influencer (Choi & Rifon 2012). Many participants in the present study found similarities between themselves and the micro-influencers:

I like these pictures because they're from Canada, something that is close to where we are right now and maybe one day I can go and try those routes. Even though I am not strong enough yet [laughs]. (F)

In social psychology, reference groups are considered to be a significant source of perspectives, norms and values for an individual. Stafford (1966) notes that reference groups can influence behaviour in two ways: through aspiration levels or by influencing different kinds of behaviour. Reference groups can cause either satisfaction or frustration, because they influence aspiration levels. In the current study, the participants were seeking personalities and accounts that reflected their own aspirations:

She is real and that's what I like. Because some girls on Instagram are superficial. She's always positive and I try to be positive. I try to do that, to not complain about my life like her. (I)

Choi and Rifon (2012) stated that when the content posted by the influencer is compatible with the follower's personality and thoughts, the psychological closeness between the follower and the influencer is more significant. This may also result in a higher influence on the follower and the intention to follow advice from the influencer.

Furthermore, several theories suggest that the fundamental human motivation is a "need to belong" and to achieve a sense of extended self (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brewer, 1991; Brewer & Gardner 1996, 83). Therefore, individuals construct much of their social identity through relationships with others and a search for communities. Moreover, it is assumed by most theories of personal self-esteem that people evaluate themselves through personal characteristics and traits through interpersonal comparison to relevant others (Brewer & Gardner 1996, 85). The participants in the present study were seeking connectedness to the micro-influencer and found it in the way the micro-influencers presented themselves on their social media accounts:

You can see the art but also the person and how he is. He has a crazy hair colour, and I like this picture. I like art so I was working on my Instagram in a similar style to his; I wanted to show my art: what I do but also show myself and who I am. I like Instagram because of that. (G)

I wouldn't follow him if he was from Spain, but because he is from Finland and I can relate to that. (D)

Similar to when choosing companies, consumers choose influencers whom they find attractive in some way based on their perceptions and personal experiences, and the image the influencer and the brands convey. Peers' and relevant others' opinions about the influencer and the brand they promote also affect influencer following. If others within the reference group experience the influencer and the brands they promote favourably, the individual is also more likely to follow them, which influences the behaviours that result from the relationship. (Ahearne et al. 2005, 575.)

4.2 The relationship between Instagram micro-influencers and their followers

Through social media and especially since the rise of camera phones, a culture of visual co-presence has formed. Social streaming technologies and features such as Instagram Stories create a style that Zappavigna (2016) calls “you could be here with me” photography: “Both the medium used to take photographs, and the channel on which it is published, are thus oriented toward construing different forms of visual co-presence” (Zappavigna 2016, 283). The viewer can imagine themselves as part of the life of the shared content since everything seems to be real-time and authentic. Earlier psychological and sociological research has concluded that people strive for relationships that are harmonious with their beliefs, behaviours and feelings. Some of the participants in the present research felt a very strong connection with the micro-influencer and felt like they personally knew the micro-influencer even though none of the participants had ever met the micro-influencer in person nor talked with them:

I follow her, and I feel like I'm in her family; I know everything she does. At the beginning she only had one child and she said she didn't want more kids but then she had twins, and everyone was so surprised but happy for her of course. I feel like I know her. It's weird but it's like that. (I)

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006, 42) emphasize that the interpersonal meaning that arises from an image is based on how the image represents the “social relation between the producer, the viewer and the object presented”. Marwick (2015) notes that influencers know their fans and interact with them to boost popularity and thereby transform the traditional audience-performer relationship. Through visual choices and presented images, the micro-influencer creates an open, real, authentic and shareable space in which anyone can participate by following. When the follower feels that the micro-influencer, through their content, has created such a space, the basis for meaning-construction is built. As one participant in the present study noted:

It's not only about the pictures but it's also about the character, and how they build and see themselves. That's why I chose him [Callen Schaub; callenschaub]; it's basically that you can see artwork but also learn about the person as well. (G)

Lee et al. (2015) noted in their study that people actively seek other users on Instagram who have similar needs and interests and thus feel a strong connection to them. Identification and a sense of similarity with the micro-influencer, as presented earlier in the present research, were found to be the core reasons for following certain influencers. The perceived fit between the micro-influencer and the follower is constructed when the values, personality and lifestyle of the follower are congruent with the content created by the micro-influencer. When such a perceived fit is formed, the follower's inclination to follow the micro-influencer's recommendations and purchase products is higher. (Choi & Rifon 2012). If the follower cannot relate to the content the influencer presents, a relationship will not form. As one participant in the current study said:

I wouldn't follow someone who only posted about fashion or makeup because they are not relevant to me and if the content doesn't relate to me or my life at all. I wouldn't follow someone who doesn't have the same values and beliefs that I have either. (A)

According to Turner (1982) people often socially identify with groups, whether or not they have contact with specific members of that group. Therefore, impersonal relationships can be formed from a sense of common identification with merely a social category or a symbolic group (Brewer & Gardner 1996). Through social networks, people can reach out effortlessly to a larger group of people than was ever possible earlier and be part of virtual communities, as one participant said:

The community on Instagram embraces that we're helping each other and that you're not alone. (G)

Through social media, the number of individuals one can influence increases significantly. Because of social media's continuous presence, individuals can share information in a timely manner, and this information is available at all times. Subramani and Rajagopalan (2003, 301) also point out that social media provides ongoing feedback on the influencers' impact (through engagement, likes and comments), so that the individual can rapidly change strategies to enhance the effectiveness of their influence endeavour. Some of the participants mentioned following other influencers to whom they cannot relate but whom they find entertaining.

Based on the results of the present study, a model of relationship formation (Figure 8 below) was created to present the different levels of how meanings and relationships are formed through micro-influencers' content. The results indicate that in order for a relationship to form between the follower and the influencer, the follower needs to value the content created by the micro-influencer and feel a sense of connectivity, similarity and identification with the micro-influencer. The content needs to be visually appealing, unique and high in quality in order to stand out and differ from all the other content presented through social media channels. Without this basis for a relationship, messages and meanings within micro-influencer-generated content will not be received by the follower. The followers (here also referred to as consumers) evaluate the perceived fit and similarity with the micro-influencers through the personality, lifestyle, values and experiences that the micro-influencers communicate and convey through their content. Followers on Instagram seek validation, inspiration and motivation for their own lives and experiences and, therefore, tend to follow micro-influencers who are homophilous with them. When the followers feel that the micro-influencers share the ideas, values, lifestyle and identity traits that the followers have or wish to have, they also seek and follow advice posted by the micro-influencers. Furthermore, followers build up their sense of self and identity and give sense to their own lives and experiences through the micro-influencers' content. The meanings, emotions and factors marked in red in Figure 8 below show factors that hinder the formation of the relationship and, therefore, should be avoided.

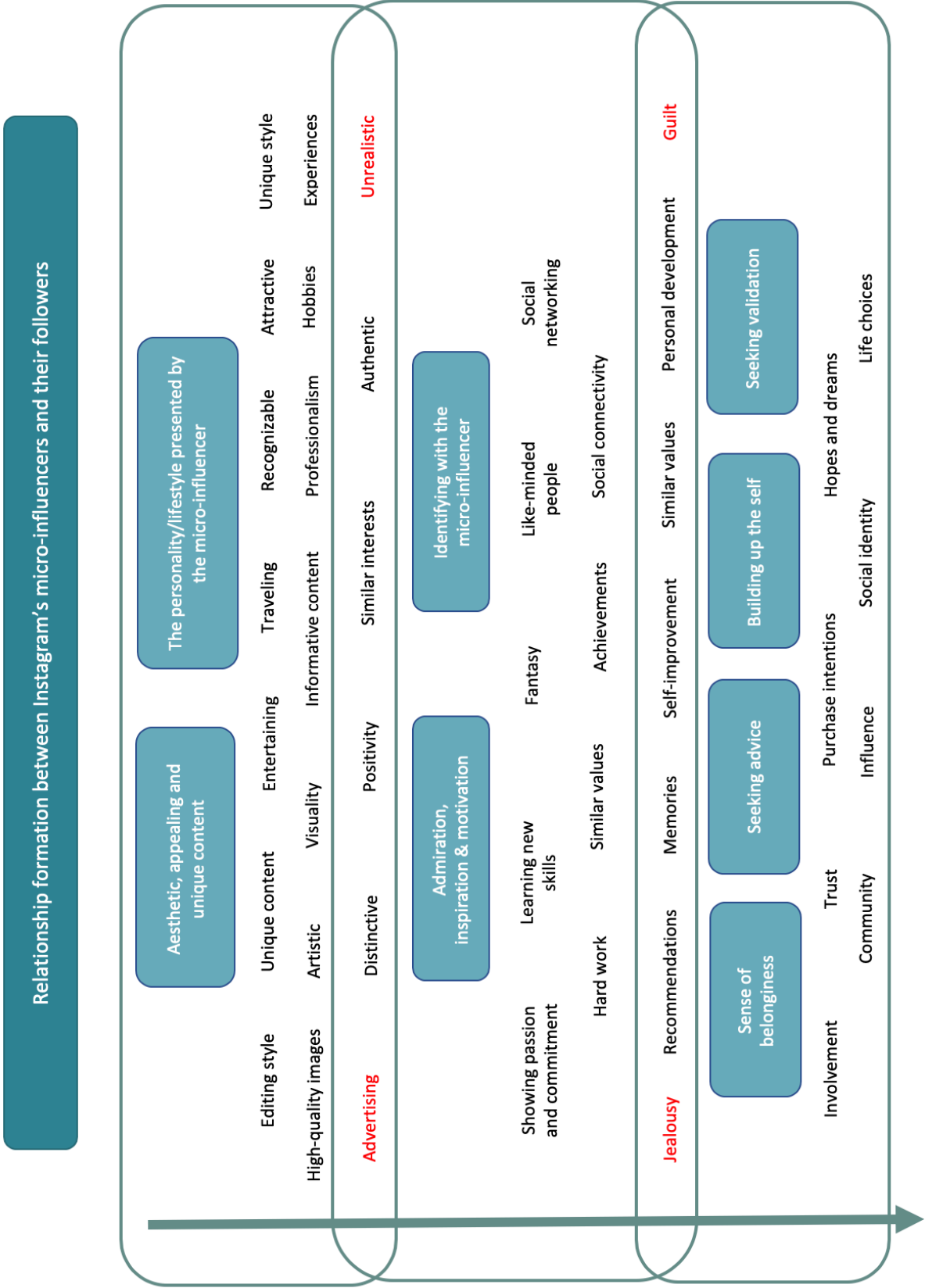


Figure 8. Relationship formation between Instagram's micro-influencers and their followers

Once the follower feels there is a fit between them and the micro-influencer, the micro-influencer has an impact on the follower by creating admiration and providing inspiration and motivation. The follower then participates in the social network and community that the micro-influencer nurtures and creates, from whence a relationship of trust and deeper meanings forms. On this level, meaning is constructed from similarity in areas such as lifestyle, personality traits, hobbies, interests and/or values, and, therefore, the follower feels they benefit from the content posted by the micro-influencer in a deeper way than just admiring the visual aspects of the content. The micro-influencers inspire the followers to pursue achievement in their own lives, getting tips and recommendations on how to achieve their goals and how to develop personally. Furthermore, on this level, the influencers may influence the followers' behaviour, and the followers are more receptive to recommendations, advice and advertisements from the influencer. As some participants in this study noted:

Sometimes scrolling through her feed affects my behaviour. Like I start stretching or I pay attention to how much I sleep because it's a reminder and it motivates me. (A)

Stuff like this [Andrea Sanders; bezerowastegirl's pictures] makes me feel good and represents peace so I like it. I think for the past two or three years I've struggled with living on my own and without a family and handling roommates and those kinds of conflicts and managing my emotions. And a big thing for me honestly was to get rid of a lot of my stuff. My room was chaotic and I would hang out in the common areas because my room was not so enjoyable to be in because it was so messy, and now that my room is clean and I love being there, if I'm mad I can chill here; I don't have to get into conflicts with someone. In my head, I recognize that these things make me feel good and calm, and that's why I keep doing them, and her Instagram has a lot of things that make me feel good and calm, so I keep looking at it. (E)

According to the findings of the present study, relationships between micro-influencers and their followers vary in nature and are different depending on the level of involvement. This was also visible in the way the participants talked about the micro-influencers. Some of the participants would use the micro-influencers' Instagram usernames during the interviews, while others would talk about the micro-influencers using their real names. The participants who used the micro-influencer's real name seemed to have a closer sense of relationship

with the micro-influencer than the ones who did not. Using one's real name as an Instagram account name seems to be a self-branding strategy and may have an effect on how and what kind of relationship the micro-influencer desires to form with the followers:

I have notifications on, so when he posts I get a notification on my phone. But it's not like I obsessively go to his page every day. I like his pictures, but I don't actively comment on them. (D)

However, meanings derived from the content of the micro-influencer were, for the participants in this research, on a deeper level than mere entertainment. Zappavigna claims that "due to the affordances of 'real-time' image-posting, as well as the visual structure, the viewer shares vicariously the represented experience" (Zappavigna 2016, 275). Through identification and similar values, the followers seek content to which they can relate and which gives meaning to situations and experiences they have in their own lives. As one of the interviewees said:

I grew up in a military family and I felt a very strong push to join the army, and I did it for a year and I didn't like it: it wasn't for me, at least not right now. And my life had been built around the thought that I would join the military and this was my path in life, and so when I left the forces I had no idea and I still have no clue what I'm doing or what I want to do. And I went through a time where I didn't know who I was, and when I got out of the army I did a climbing trip and I met a bunch of mountain guides and dirt bagged it for a month or two and lived a ridiculous lifestyle that I thought was not possible. So, she lives this lifestyle; she lives in a van and she goes climbing every day, so she has made it a career for herself, which I never thought could be possible. So, she's a hope for me that, yes, it's possible and it works and it's awesome. (J)

The findings of the present study suggest that micro-influencers who are able to create content that evokes individual meanings form strong relationships with their followers. The content produced by the micro-influencers evoked the participants' aspirations, hopes, dreams and memories in a sense that also validated and strengthened their life choices and sense of self:

My cousin took me climbing the first time when I was 14, and I used to be chubby and I lost a bunch of weight afterwards. But when I climbed back then, I got my ass kicked and I was on the ground; I couldn't get up. I could not hold, and I was like this is so hard. When I moved back to Ottawa and lost weight, I wanted to try again and even though I got my ass kicked, I was like, If you get on the top you just completed a challenge. So, my cousin brought me climbing again and I started climbing more regularly, and now I look at videos on how to become better at climbing. I watch a lot of videos from different climbers, but a lot of them was him doing the hardest climbs in the world. I watch videos of how to train, and he trains until he cannot make any more moves; he breathes heavily, then he just screams, and that's something that I want to be more like: always try hard and stay focused. This guy shows why he's the best. (F)

In the research literature on interpersonal attraction, liking between two individuals is strongly related to the similarity between them (Byrne 1971). People are likely to become friends to the extent that they perceive that they are similar to each other in preferences, attitudes, and values. At this interpersonal level, attraction seems to be a function of the two individuals' personal traits and the degree of match between their individual identities. (Brewer & Gardner 1996, 86.) Therefore, the attractiveness of the micro-influencer, which has also been mentioned in earlier research, was also an important aspect for some of the participants in this study:

I admire her style and her appearance. Seems like Sara is a sweet girl and, of course, she is extremely beautiful; it's horrible to think that that's a reason I follow her but, to be honest, it is one of the reasons. (B)

I follow her because she's beautiful, that's always the case. Her whole family is beautiful, it's the perfect image of a perfect family. (I)

The findings of the present study suggest that the attractiveness of the micro-influencer, whether it involves looks, lifestyle or personality traits, awakens the hopes, dreams, aspirations and fantasies the followers have about themselves and their lives, whether consciously or unconsciously.

When the relationship between an influencer and their followers has reached a deeper level of meaning, the followers co-experience moments with the influencer and feel as if they are a part of the micro-influencer's life, as the following quotation shows:

You get nervous for this person; when you see him climb, you get nervous, and your palms start to sweat, and you live the climb with him. (F)

On the other hand, if the micro-influencer presented ideas or content that was not sufficiently in harmony with the follower's ideas or values, it would make them unfollow the micro-influencer, as the following participants stated:

He focuses on Finland and the Nordic countries, and that inspires me because I am trying to find something similar to my own pictures and it's a learning perspective; so, when I see his pictures, I think how I could learn from him. (D)

If she got super political and she posted something about politics I would unfollow her. I hate politics, man, I don't know why. I know it's important, but people get so passionate about it and so angry, and I think it always leads to fights and arguments. I don't see that in her feed, and I see that in so many other people's feeds: they were doing whatever, and then comes election time and you can see clearly where they stand. But I've never seen that in her feed, which is cool. She is not trying to publish her views and I appreciate that. I look up to her so much that I would be disappointed. I would see that as an unnecessary thing. (J)

If she was really showing off her body and if her pictures were over-edited, I'd unfollow her. Because I would be like, "Why is it necessary to show off your body?" It's like you only want attention and it's not inspiring in any way. Sara is trying to get attention from her peers and young women through her content, and she's not trying to get likes from showing off her body and get likes from men, and I think that's something that you can thank her for. She is an inspiration. And maybe also it's relatable because she's also insecure about her body, or I don't know if that's the reason she doesn't post that kinds of pictures, but maybe her personality is also the thing: she doesn't think she needs to show off, which is relatable. (B)

The “perceived-fit” concept emphasizes the meaning of values and similarity that individuals seek in the content posted by social media influencers. People are not looking for thoughts or beliefs that contradict their own. The results of the present study, as well as those of previous research, show that people are looking for homophilous relationships that support and reinforce their own lives, values, experiences and beliefs. Therefore, the “perceived-fit” concept is one of the most crucial factors that contribute to the individuals’ sense of belongingness and lead them to seek advice from people they consider as their peers.

4.3 Seeking advice versus promoting on Instagram

Viral marketing is based on existing social networks where people share information and recommend products and services within their network. The reason why viral marketing is so effective is that it is based on trusting other people such as friends, family and nowadays anyone within your network, including strangers and influencers. Previous research has shown that people trust opinions and recommendations from their social network far more than traditional advertisements (Nail et al. 2004). Viral marketing is based on the assumption that a few influential members or nodes of a network influence others in that network, thereby triggering a wave of recommendations and ultimately getting people to try the recommended products and services (Kempe et al. 2003, 106).

Moreover, Subramani and Rajagopalan (2003, 306) contend that the success of viral marketing depends on the social network perceiving the influencers as knowledgeable helpers rather than marketers’ representatives. As participants in the present study said:

Her style is one of the big reasons I follow her. She wears clothes that are affordable, and that’s why her style is relatable. Her style is not too much, but it still has something special in it. Sometimes it happens unconsciously, I see her dressing in corduroy and then I’m like, “Okay this is now trending, maybe I should wear this too”, and what she wears has an effect on what I think is trending and ‘in’. (B)

I get tips where to travel and where to go to take pictures from his feed; it’s definitely something I am looking for on Instagram. (D)

As noted earlier in this thesis, for the content posted by the micro-influencer to be perceived as valuable, the similarity, values and style between the micro-influencer and the followers have to be a “fit”. Casaló et al. (2018) found that the key factors in being perceived as an opinion leader on Instagram are the originality and uniqueness of the content the influencer creates. Influencers have a symbolic aspirational reference group association, which makes it easier for consumers to identify with them than with companies or brands (Assael 1984; Kamins 1990, 4). Comments by participants in the present study confirm that there needs to be a sense of social connectivity before they follow advice posted by the micro-influencers:

These clothes would be an example for me of how to dress. She wears clothes that are not expensive, except the bags. Some girls on Instagram use such expensive clothes that I could never afford. But these ones that she posts are from Zara and H&M, so you can find them easily, and it's better than having only expensive clothes. (I)

Sometimes before I go to a restaurant, I search for pictures on Instagram of that restaurant to see whether it's worth going and if it looks nice. It's nice that someone has been there before, so I know what to anticipate. I can relate to Sara giving recommendations more than Jamie Oliver because maybe her taste is more similar to mine. (B)

Romero et al. noted that influencers should not over-promote products and services, so that they are perceived as authentic helpers of others (2011, 18). The participants in the present research also explained that over-promoting was a negative aspect of micro-influencer following and, in addition, would make them unfollow the micro-influencer because promoting brands was not seen as authentic. Most of the participants said that if the micro-influencer promoted brands too visibly and forcefully, they would not follow them:

I follow these people because I don't want my feed to be full of ads, giveaways and promotions. If the influencer is over-promoting through their channels, it's annoying, and promoting affects who I follow. I'm kind of sure that he does some cooperation with brands, but he doesn't do it in such a way that I would have noticed. (D)

The advertising is related to the realness, and it's negatively related, because it affects the content she posts, and it makes me wonder if it is only for the money. (I)

Subramani and Rajagopalan (2003, 300) note that online social networks are a powerful source of information influencing, adoption and use of new products and services. The results of the present study lead to the conclusion that consumers are not looking for ads on Instagram. Followers are looking for authentic recommendations from micro-influencers. Therefore, an important aspect of influencer marketing is that influencers must be perceived as authentic whether or not they really are, as the following quotations show:

I started following this person about a year ago, and at the time I did a zero waste challenge and I followed a lot of people that posted about zero waste, but then unfollowed everyone else except her because it got very repetitive, and she had the best content. She's very chill, shows how to do things and she doesn't guilt you; she doesn't convey the perfect life at all because she's like, "This is hard, I had a bad day, I did this; it's not perfect but it's a work in progress." (E)

If he had a sponsored ad and he would be like, "You guys should definitely check out this product I'm using", I'd unfollow him. It's just not real. There were other people who I followed and then unfollowed them because they were bragging all the time about products and brands they worked with. (F)

From the responses of the participants, it was clear that the way brands and recommendations are presented is also very critical when it comes to following advice posted by micro-influencers on Instagram:

I don't like people who post only about food; it's too much for me, but I like Emilie's food pictures because she gives tips on her feed, like the address and recommendations of restaurants and cafes. (I)

I see so many ads on Instagram daily. A lot of influencers have blogs and websites they try to get you to go to. She doesn't have a blog and it's better, because I follow another fashion influencer who does, and it's harder because I have to go on the blog

to see what products she uses and recommends. With her you only have to swipe and then you immediately have the product in the picture. (I)

He definitely has sponsors, but he never does it like, "You guys should try this". It's not the first thing he says; it's about him climbing, and then the ad is embedded in the post. (F)

The brands and companies the influencers endorse need to be seen as a fit for the influencers so that the followers see a seamless image and authentic lifestyle in which brands are "naturally" involved. Thus, the micro-influencers need to be seen just like any other friend, as giving recommendations on good products they have found naturally. In our present culture of the information age people make choices based on the opinions of friends and peers. (Cha et al. 2010, 11.)

4.4 Re-evaluation of the theoretical framework

The purpose of this study was to understand how meanings are constructed by followers of Instagram micro-influencers and to detect factors that explain micro-influencer following. The theoretical framework (see Figure 6 on p. 37) was constructed based on knowledge from various research fields, including sociology, psychology, the users and gratifications theory, semiotics, consumer research and mass communication. This provided a holistic framework to understand consumers' meaning-making processes.

The study shows that the factors that affect the construction of consumers' meanings and mental models are multidimensional. In accordance with earlier research from various fields such as psychology, sociology and mass communication, the theoretical framework was based on the assumption that personal history, memories, values, culture, language, beliefs and social relations affect an individual's meaning construction and formation. Furthermore, social networks, which today are both virtual and face-to-face, affect a person's meaning formation and value hierarchy. It cannot be neglected that an individual's behaviour is partly based on the influence, information and opinions of other people. In addition, both the content and structure of mental models are important when trying to understand the

meanings and meaning construction and, therefore, both of them were addressed and analysed in this research.

It was noticed that all of the dimensions mentioned above affected the participants' meaning formation, and they were taken into consideration while conducting the interviews and analysis. All of the meaning constructs and meanings that emerged from the data were connected to each other but also to the consumers' personal history, memories, values, culture, language, beliefs and social relations. Furthermore, as presented in the theoretical framework, these meanings are intertwined and generally discussed together. Even the individuals themselves do not always consciously understand where the meanings stem from.

In addition to the earlier framework (presented in Figure 6), it was noticed during data gathering and analysis that, in fact, micro-influencers have a broader influence not only on meaning construction but also on the aspects that affect an individual's meaning construction and mental models. The influence also extends to social networks and the media usage of the individual. It was noted in this study that if a micro-influencer uses also another platform in unison with Instagram, for example YouTube, the follower might begin to use this platform or channel to follow the influencer on this platform as well. Therefore, the micro-influencer also affects the social networks in which the individual participates.

In addition, the follower also has influence on the micro-influencer, which was not taken into account in the original theoretical framework. The follower might suggest to someone in their network to also follow the micro-influencer, which, in turn, affects the micro-influencer's social network. Moreover, the micro-influencer is affected by the reactions and engagement of the followers as well as by societal norms and trends. Therefore, the content produced by micro-influencers, and the visual signs within them, are a negotiation between the producer and the audience, but also a negotiation with the society, culture and trends. The revised theoretical framework of the study is presented in Figure 9 below.

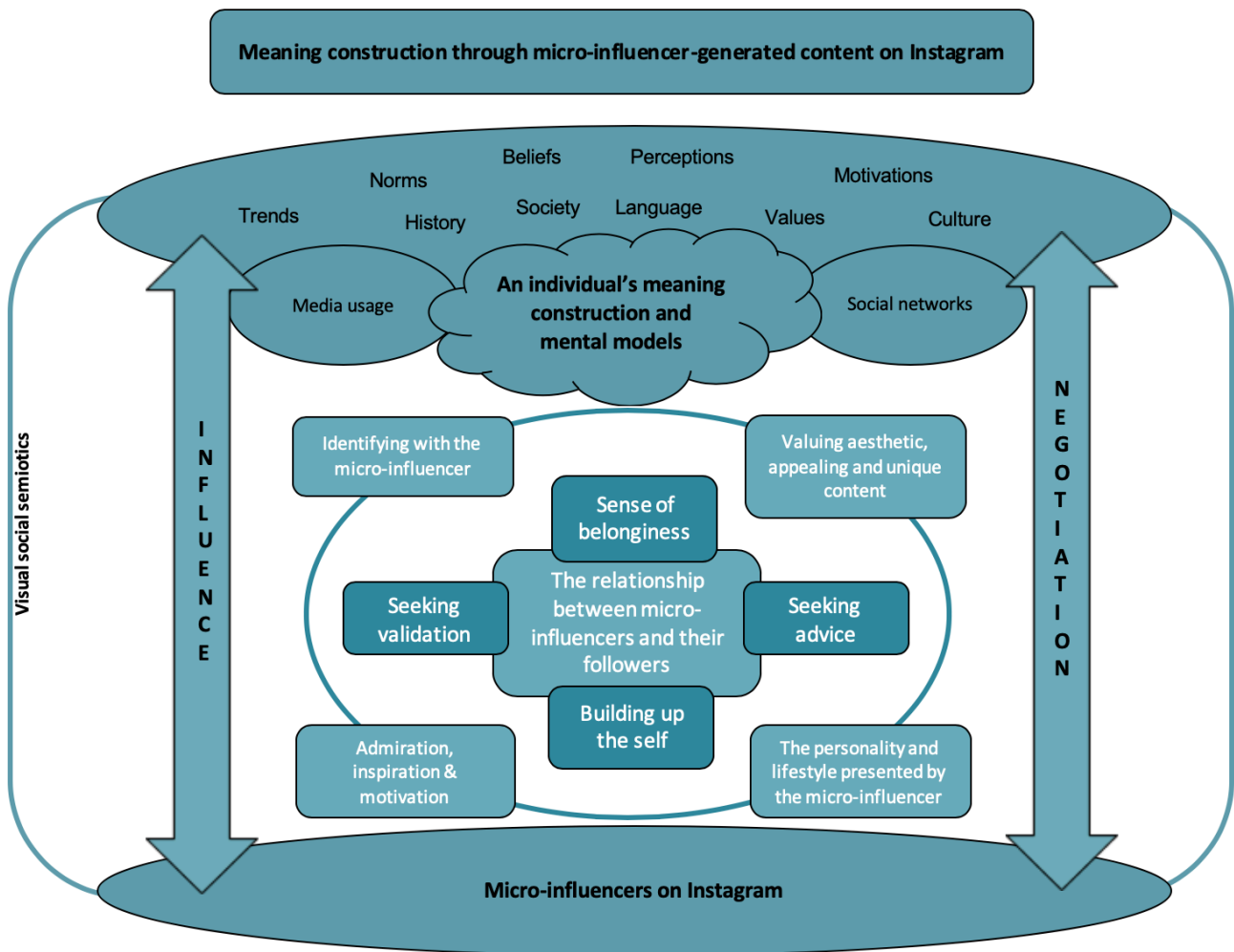


Figure 9. Re-evaluation of the theoretical framework

Figure 9 illustrates the re-evaluation of the theoretical framework in which all of the new aspects that were discussed above have been included. The re-evaluated theoretical framework emphasises that meaning construction is a negotiation between the producer of the content and the interpretant, and that both of them are bound to the multidimensional aspects of their personal and societal histories such as the culture, trends, motivations and values that are merged and intertwined. The re-evaluated theoretical framework shows the meanings that emerged from the data and emphasizes that the validation of the meanings from the followers' side is the basis for micro-influencer following and relationship formation.

5 SUMMARY

5.1 Summary of the research

The purpose of this study was to understand how meanings are constructed by followers of Instagram micro-influencers. Furthermore, this study aimed to expose the factors that explain micro-influencer following.

In this research, a consensus map of meanings that are formed within Instagram's micro-influencer following (see Figure 7 on p. 53) was created, and four emerging meaning constructs and factors were identified: 1) *valuing aesthetic, appealing and unique content*; 2) *the personality and lifestyle presented by the micro-influencer*; 3) *admiration, inspiration and motivation*; and 4) *identifying with the influencer*. Furthermore, all of the meaning constructs and factors were linked to the following core meanings: 1) *a sense of belongingness*; 2) *building up the self*; 3) *seeking advice*; and 4) *seeking validation for the participants' own lives, experiences, values and choices*.

Micro-influencer following can be seen as being constructed based on a sense of similarity, identification and a shared value-system. Moreover, the content needs to be visually appealing, unique and perceived as valuable and informative in order to stand out and differ from all the other content presented through social media channels. The results of the study indicate that if the micro-influencer posted content that is not aligned with the follower's values and beliefs, the follower would unfollow the micro-influencer and the relationship between the two would dissolve. Therefore, the sense of similarity, shared meanings and personality presented by the micro-influencer through visual choices has a substantial impact on micro-influencer following and on the behaviour of the followers in taking advice from the micro-influencer. Followers on Instagram seek validation, inspiration and motivation for their own lives and experiences and, therefore, tend to follow micro-influencers that they can identify and who provide support and validation to the followers' lives. The meaning construct found in this research of identification is consistent with the results of previous research that "people actively seek out social relationships with other users who share similar interests and needs, in which they feel an important connection to them" (Lee et al. 2015, 555). In addition, the results of the present study confirmed that people seek

motivation, confirmation and validation for their own beliefs, situations and experiences in life when following micro-influencers. Furthermore, followers build up their sense of self and identity through the micro-influencers' content. Unintentionally, the micro-influencer may also convey negative meanings and emotions through their content, such as guilt, jealousy, an unrealistic lifestyle or personality and unauthenticity in advertising, which hinder the formation of the relationship and, therefore, should be avoided. When the micro-influencer is able to create content that supports the followers' meaning construction and validates it, a deeper relationship that goes beyond passive following and scrolling can be formed between the follower and the influencer.

Influencer marketing has been considered to be more effective and less expensive than traditional advertising because it provides targeted access to engaged audiences (Evans et al. 2017). Consumers perceive advertisements created by influencers as more trustworthy than traditional marketing efforts from companies. Sometimes the followers do not even perceive advertisements as advertising, since influencers often integrate their paid posts seamlessly into their Instagram posts about everyday life. This may lead to a more authentic and efficient way to market products to consumers since it has been proven that recommendations from peers, family and even strangers are perceived as more trustworthy than any other form of advertising. Therefore, social media influencers have become a new, valuable way of reaching the right target audience and building relationships between brands and consumers through influencers' ability to foster engagement and involvement. Involvement is the degree to which an individual actively participates in the medium and the information-exchange process, which is a crucial factor in today's information overflow environment of multiple channels competing to grasp consumers' attention.

The results of this study indicate that marketers should come up with new social media strategies that include influencers to become more efficient in their marketing efforts. Companies should capitalise on social media influencers' wide social networks and benefit from the intimate, authentic and trustworthy relationships the influencers have created with their audience (Hearn & Schoenhoff 2016, 202–205). Successful influencer marketing leads to creating favourable attitudes towards products, brands and companies that are able to use influencers accordingly (Subramani & Rajagopalan 2003).

Based on the results of the present research, a model of the different levels of relationship formation was created to show how meanings and relationships are formed through micro-influencers' content (see Figure 8 on p. 68). The results indicate that on the first level, in order to create a following and a basis for a relationship between the follower and the influencer, the content posted by the influencer needs to be unique in nature and must resonate with the followers' needs and interests. Moreover, there must be a sense of similarity and identification through the content the influencer posts. Without this basis for a relationship, messages and meanings within micro-influencer-generated content will not be received by the follower. The followers evaluate the perceived fit through the personality, lifestyle, values and experiences the micro-influencers communicate and convey through their content.

A great deal of debate has been going on concerning how much influencers have influence on their followers. De Veirman et al. (2017, 799) state that previous results vary from "a clear connection between number of followers and opinion leadership to number of followers being merely an indication of popularity rather than influence." However, measuring one's audience size or follower amount has usually been the first step in identifying opinion leaders, as numerous studies have emphasized. De Veirman et al. (2017, 802) underline that it still remains uncertain how far consumers process the information of influencers and how consumers evaluate influencers on social media. Iyengar et al. (2011) note that people who are regarded as opinion leaders by their peers probably truly influence them.

According to the results of the present study, once the follower feels there is a fit between them and the micro-influencer, the relationship moves to the next level, where the micro-influencer has an impact on the follower through identification, admiration, inspiration and motivation. The follower participates in the social networking and virtual community that the micro-influencers boost and obtain. If the follower participates in the social processes and the content of the micro-influencers, a relationship of trust, influence and deeper meaning may be formed between the follower and the micro-influencer. On this level, the meanings are constructed from the perceived similar identity, personality and lifestyle. Therefore, the micro-influencer may also affect the social identity formation of the follower. On the other hand, the micro-influencer may unintentionally create negative feelings like jealousy and guilt. Therefore, the micro-influencer should communicate, through their content, a lifestyle and personality that are admirable yet perceived as achievable. Only then does the

relationship evolve into more than merely following. On this level the micro-influencer has an influence on the follower's behaviour, feelings and life. Once this level is achieved, the follower is more receptive to recommendations, advice and advertisements from the influencer because of admiration, perceived similarity and trust.

5.2 Theoretical contribution of the research

Marketing research, as long as it has existed, has shifted between the need to find meaning and to measure. Qualitative researchers have argued that since the world is constantly evolving around complexities concerning language and visual content, we do not understand enough if we do not understand the richness of motivation and perception, and how they interact with and influence each other. (Levy 1999, 264.)

Theories are “a formal statement of the rules on which a subject of study is based or ideas that are suggested to explain a fact or event or, more generally, an opinion or explanation” (Cambridge Dictionary 2019). Theories can explain a phenomenon in a broad range of ways. The explanations that are provided by the research would ideally be generalizable and provide wider insight into the phenomena.

According to Crane et al. (2016), a good theoretical work includes *originality* of contribution and *utility*. Originality of contribution refers to how much new insight the study can bring to a topic that has not been discussed before. The other feature of meaningful theoretical contribution is its utility: the findings of the research are usable in terms of scientists and practitioners. The present research contributes to both original and usable information.

First of all, influencer marketing - and more specifically, micro-influencer marketing - is a phenomenon that has not attracted much interest in marketing research until today. Most of the research on the topic has focused on influencer-brand relations and the attributes of the influencer. However, the most important aspect of influencer marketing from a social and cultural perspective has been neglected: the consumers. The present research focuses, therefore, on a gap in existing research by providing insight into meanings that are formed in the consumers' mental processes and how the meanings that are formed can facilitate or hinder relationship formation between consumers and influencers and, furthermore,

between consumers and brands. Previous research neglects the fact that influencers are selected by their followers and that an influencer's success lies truly in their followers, which is why the focus should be turned to the followers' meaning making.

Moreover, consumers today are drowning in various marketing messages from multiple channels, so it is important to understand what kinds of messages and content are found to be appealing and meaningful and how they create meaning and emotions, a process on which the present thesis sheds light. Since the consumers' consumption needs, experiences and self-perceptions vary according to what personal and shared meanings are salient at the given consumption context (Thompson 1997, 439), it was important in the present research to provide insight into the meanings that consumers construct when faced with influencer-generated content.

More interestingly, earlier research on visibility in communications has focused exclusively on advertising and on the persuasive influence advertising has on individuals and society. Marketing and advertising research have predominantly used cognitive information processing frameworks in order to conceptualise the way marketing communications influence consumers (Hackley 1998, 126). Little attention has been paid to how visual material contributes to consumers' and individuals' meaning-making processes and how the individuals use these meanings to experience, interpret and understand their lives and the world. Consequently, the present study provides new insight into meaning-making processes in visual communication from the consumers' perspective by applying understanding and tools from visual social semiotics.

Ladik and Stewart (2008, 162) present three domains to which researchers can contribute: conceptual, methodological and substantive domains, which they also call theoretical, methodological and contextual contributions. Firstly, the conceptual domain offers explanations for the phenomenon of interest. By conceptualizing and identifying meanings and factors that explain influencer following from the customers' point of view, this thesis generates beneficial information within the field of influencer marketing and marketing communications. Furthermore, the theoretical contribution of this thesis lies in combining semiotics and visual social semiotics with consumer research to explain meaning formation through visual content, which is still a relatively unused theoretical framework in marketing

research. Semiotic awareness allows marketing professionals and advertisers to discover what is required for each marketing activity, channel and process (Zakia & Nadin 1987, 6).

Secondly, a new methodological approach to a research phenomenon can contribute to existing research. By applying the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique, which is a fairly new method in the field of marketing and consumer research, and adapting it to fit the purposes of this research, this thesis offers an important methodological contribution by providing deep understanding and knowledge of consumers' meaning-making processes and what factors contribute to micro-influencer following. By restricting the image collection from the original ZMET analysis to analysing only content from Instagram, this thesis also extended the usage of the method itself.

Thirdly, the contextual contributions of this thesis offer new insight through the context of the phenomena studied, such as target group, geographical location and market section. In this thesis, more understanding was produced on visual communication and marketing on a specific social media platform, Instagram. Since 78% of influencers prefer Instagram as a collaboration platform and the potential audience reach of advertising on Instagram is 802 million people (Omnicores 2019), it is one of the most crucial channels for marketing activities nowadays, especially in influencer marketing. Moreover, 64% of 18-19-year-olds use Instagram (West 2019), and this study provides knowledge concerning the meaning formation and motivations for following of these young millennials, who are becoming more important as a target group for all brands.

5.3 Practical implications of the research

The results of this study contribute to practical implications in several ways. First of all, it is crucial for companies to understand what customers are looking for on social networks, how meanings are constructed and added to original brand meanings and identities, and how to market to consumers through influencers in a beneficial and effective way. On Instagram, effective marketing is able to get the consumers' attention through images and other visual content in an authentic way. It has been noted in many previous studies and in academia that visual imagery contains and conveys more information than texts, and is more memorable and, therefore, more impactful (Joffe 2008). Furthermore, nowadays images and

visual technology are the preferred idiom of a new generation of users for self-expression and communication; thus, the central question in marketing today is how to resonate with consumers' meaning formation through valuable content that may lead to long-lasting, beneficial relationships.

In line with earlier research, this study confirmed that photographs play a crucial role in meaning-making because they open up new ways of alternative interpretations and for different kinds of experiences, memories and feelings (Seppänen 2011, 163). To create effective marketing campaigns, it is important to recognize the meanings and hidden motifs constructed through the visual choices in social media content (Zappavigna 2016, 272) and understand how the content is interpreted by consumers.

The findings presented in this thesis, together with earlier studies, highlight the fact that brands need to start by finding influencers who work in a specific market and target specific groups in order to be influential. An important factor for the influencer to be distinguished from the mass is their ability to produce unique and professional, high-quality content. This is the first step for building a following. In addition, the lifestyle and personality presented by the influencers must be aligned with the brand image, seem authentic and be identifiable. By sharing similar values and styles with their audience, the influencer is able to create a relationship with the follower, and the consumer starts to take tips, recommendations and ideas from the influencer. The consumer needs to feel that the content is valuable for them and helps and supports them and their thoughts in their own life experiences. The influencer needs to present an image that motivates and inspires consumers while avoiding creating an unachievable, unreal image that is non-relatable, since this may evoke negative feelings towards the influencer, the brand and/or the consumer themselves.

It is crucial for companies to understand what kind of meanings visual content evokes in consumers and how meanings can contribute to relationship formation. This study presents a framework that helps us understand how the perceived meanings affect the relationship formation between the influencer and their followers (see Figure 8 on p. 68). In order to create efficient influencer campaigns, the brand first needs to find an influencer that is a "fit" for with the brand and the brand values. Based on the results of the present study, consumers follow influencers with whom they can identify and whom they find to have similar values and personality traits as they themselves have. Therefore, we can assume that when

the influencer is a good fit with the brand, the brand will fit most of the followers of that influencer. Since the influencer is regarded as an opinion leader by the followers, there is a good chance that the followers will follow the advice given by the influencer. The fit between the influencer and the brand needs to be perceived as a fit also by the followers because if the advertising and endorsement of brands does not seamlessly fit into the micro-influencer's usual content, it will be regarded as inauthentic advertising and might have counterproductive effects both on the brand and the influencer. (Casaló et al. 2018; De Veirman et al. 2017; Kamins 1990.)

Moreover, companies should facilitate a place on social media channels where relationships can be built up between their brands and consumers. To build strong, long-lasting and beneficial relationships with consumers, brands should embed social media influencers in their marketing strategy. The present study concludes that consumers find advertising on Instagram irritating and, therefore, connect with social media influencers more easily than with brands. Influencers are able to create an authentic, real and interactive space to which consumers are more likely to relate and in which they see influencers as peers. It is this interactive, intimate, accessible and believable image and relationship the influencers are able to build with their followers from which brands should try to benefit (De Veirman et al. 2017, 801). Influencer marketing has been shown to be more effective and less expensive than traditional advertising because it provides targeted access to engaged audiences (Evans et al. 2017). In addition, consumers perceive advertisements created by influencers as more trustworthy than traditional marketing and sometimes not even as advertisements, since influencers often embed their paid posts seamlessly in their Instagram posts about everyday life.

The most critical part of connecting with consumers in today's world is to understand that marketing is not advertising. Nowadays' millennial consumers are not looking for brands or advertisements on social media; they are looking for ways to express and extend their self, to showcase their values and identities, and form connections with like-minded peers. Marketing, thus, acts as a source to produce meanings for consumers outside of services and products. Influencer marketing is all about portraying ideas, fantasies, aspirations and hopes. Getting insight on how consumers interpret signs and use products and services in order to understand and reflect their own life experiences is necessary in today's increasingly competitive markets. Therefore, understanding semiotics, consumers'

meaning-making processes and how to produce communications through signs can add significant value to brands.

5.4 Further research

As Carrigan et al. (2005) have noted, focusing on images challenges the basic view of marketing practices, reinforces the centrality of visuals and also changes the topics of analysis. Focusing on images in marketing research is crucial, since visuality is central in marketing communications through advertisements, brand, corporate and product images.

To create effective influencer campaigns that help companies form long-lasting relationships with consumers, it is fundamental to comprehend the various meanings that are presented, sought and processed in visual content.

Future research should concentrate on various aspects of meaning-making processes, influencer marketing and the usage of visual content that were not explored in the present study. An interesting way to get more insight into the subject would be to study how the meanings in an image differ between various observers, and how shared meanings and individual meanings are constructed. Even though this study included participants from a wide variety of backgrounds, cultures and countries, the focus was on identifying meanings, not comparing the meanings constructed by different participants. Therefore, a comparative study of differences that includes different cultures and participants from various countries could provide useful information on how the culture and society shape, build and affect an individual's meaning-making processes.

This research also neglected the influencer's perspective and, therefore, further research could provide a more complete picture of influencer marketing by incorporating the influencer's perspective. Since influencer marketing is a growing phenomenon, it is important to understand the mindset and processes of the influencer, and whether or not the meanings produced and interpreted by the influencer's content are intended. Gaining more insight into what type of content and what factors within the content engage people would be beneficial knowledge when creating visuals for marketing purposes.

Since visuals, including still images, videos and graphics, are increasingly becoming the principal medium for communication, the most important aspect for future researchers and marketing practitioners to focus on is ethical questions regarding visuals. Since visual content includes signs, meanings and information that go beyond verbal language, marketing research needs to more broadly understand how to address questions that communication and media studies have been asking for decades. It is important to study how the images that we, as marketing practitioners, create, generate, structure and shape meanings, beliefs, norms and cultures. Images in advertising are a central part of the experienced visual world and shape our reality and what we believe to be true or right. Thus, it is crucial to gain knowledge concerning the negative sides of the imagery we create. Berger's statement from 1989 is more relevant today than ever:

Those individuals who, in some almost magical way (which they may not completely understand themselves), have the ability to harness the power of the image must take responsibility for what they do. To the extent that seeing is believing, we must make sure that the images we create do not generate beliefs that are individually or socially destructive. (Berger 1989, 4)

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7 APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: Invitation and instructions for the participants

Dear X,

I am a marketing student from the University of Tampere, and I am doing my master's thesis on Instagram micro-influencers. I am interviewing 10 people to understand what following an Instagram micro-influencer means to the follower. Instagram micro-influencers are people whose accounts have between 10,000 and 500,000 followers and who post about various topics such as lifestyle, fashion, travel, gaming, fitness, food, business or pets. Usually, micro-influencers are specific in their posts, concentrate mostly on one subject and are very connected with their audiences.

For the interview I would like to ask you to choose one Instagram micro-influencer that you actively follow. Collect 8-10 pictures from that micro-influencer's Instagram account to represent what following this micro-influencer means to you. Save these pictures and bring them to the interview. The interview will be based on a marketing research technique called ZMET (Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique) which focuses on discussing the pictures you've selected. The interview will take around 1 to 1.5 hours.

The answers provided by the interviewees will be used only for this research and the names of the participants will be kept anonymous. Please let me know what times would be suitable for you for the interview.

Thank you for your participation in this research.

Best regards,

Nora Hurd

Marketing student

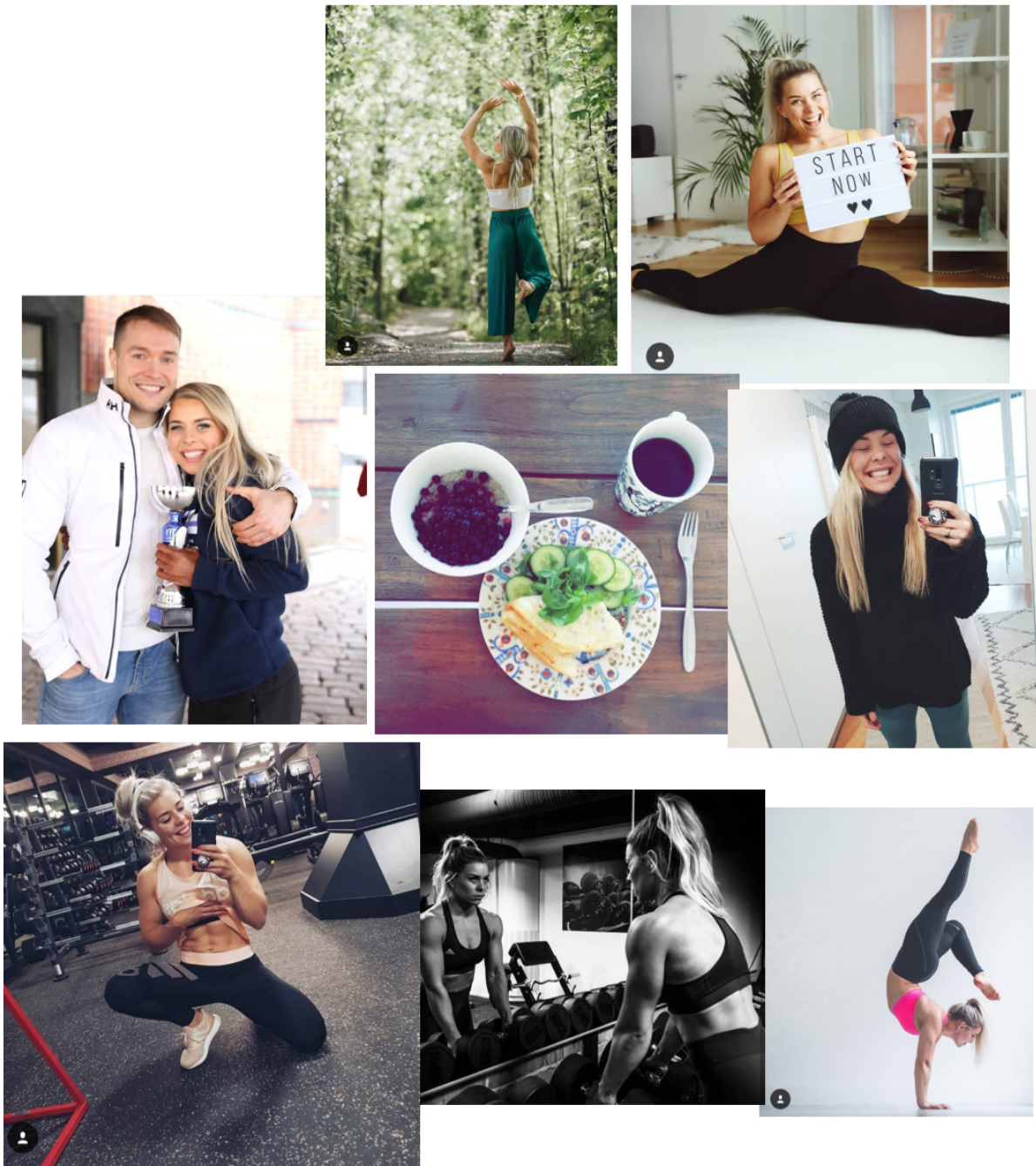
Master's thesis worker at Tampere University, Finland

APPENDIX 2: Modified ZMET interview used in this research (Adapted from Zaltman 1997)

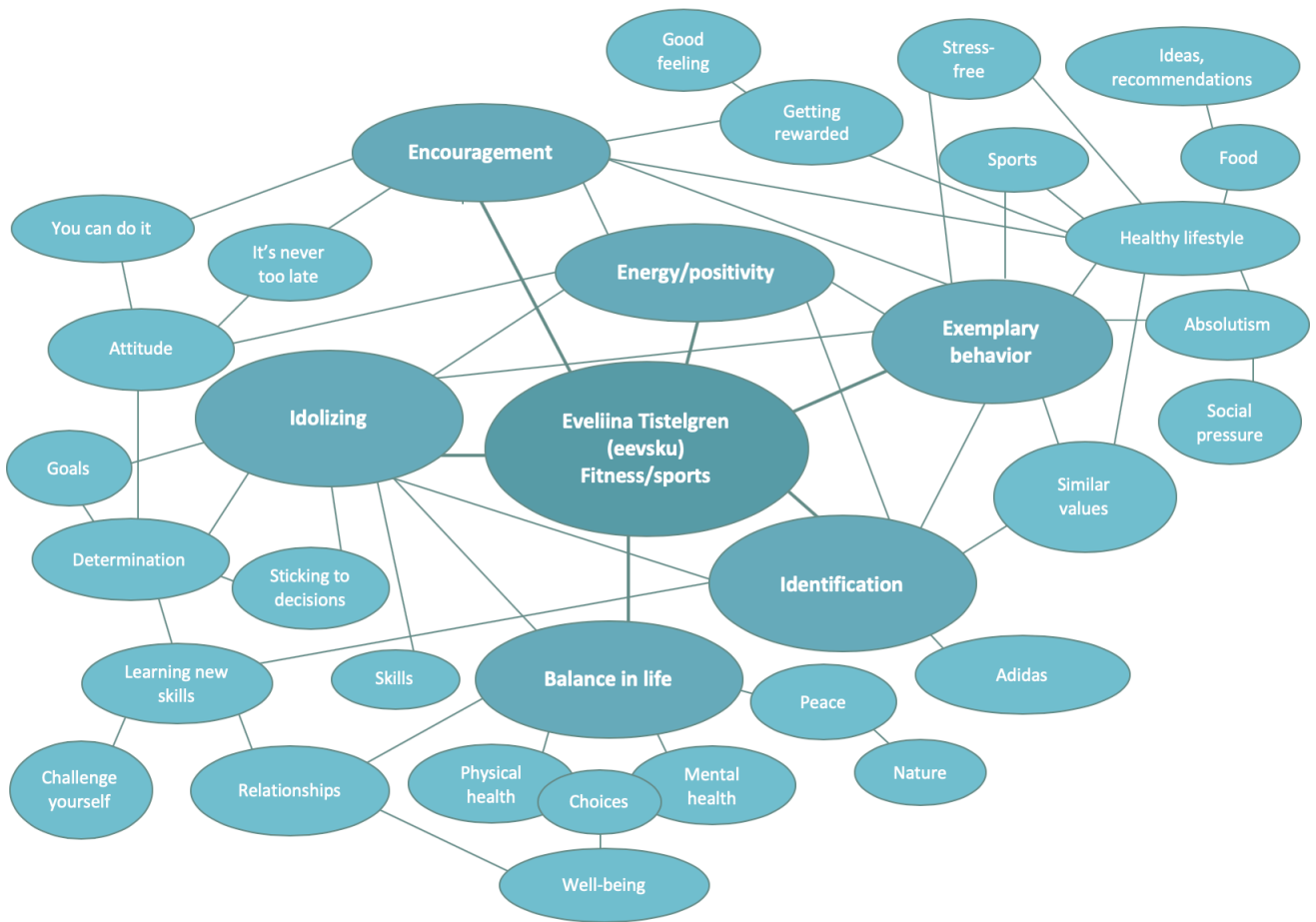
1. Tell me about these images you have selected one by one. How do they reflect what following this influencer means to you? Why have you chosen these pictures?
2. Which kind of pictures did you not find but were hoping to find that would have presented why you follow this influencer?
3. Please sort the pictures you selected into meaningful piles. What do you feel are the main themes?
4. The interviewer randomly chooses three pictures and asks the participant how two of them are similar but are different from the third one. This is continued until the participant does not come up with new constructs. Constructs include expressions like emotions, thoughts, values, concepts, feelings and ideas that are important to the participant. The interviewer creates a mental map from the constructs and themes that come up.
5. Choose one picture that best describes what following this micro-influencer means to you.
6. What would be an opposite image that this micro-influencer could post? What would that image contain?
7. What kinds of smells, tastes, colours and feelings does this micro-influencer's feed/account give you?
8. Do any negative thoughts, feelings or notions arise from any of the images?
9. The participant creates a mental map out of the constructs that have been identified earlier and explains the relationships among these constructs. The interviewer makes sure that nothing is missing. If something is missing, it is added.
10. The interviewer creates a consensus map of the most important constructs that came out from the interview.

APPENDIX 3: Participant A's images

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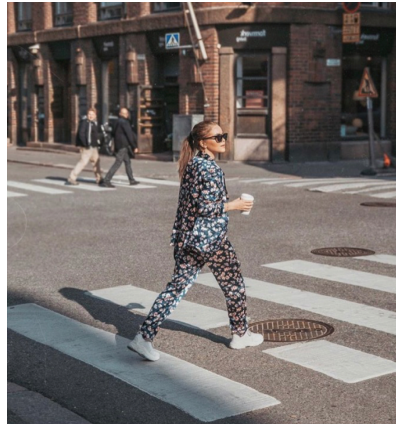


APPENDIX 4: Participant A's mental map



APPENDIX 5: Participant C's images

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APPENDIX 6: Participant C's mental map

